

SCOTPRESS

Make it So

6



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Artwork

Keren Breen - Cover
Ruth Mellor - P 2
Nola Frame-Gray - P 7
Anita Shearman - P 52

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Editors: Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini
Typing: Gail Christison, Sheila Clark, Jackie Marshall,
Michael Simpson
Proofreading: Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini
Printing of Masters: Janet Quarton
Printing: Urban Print, 57 Perth Rd, Dundee
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Sheila Clark
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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona



ON RETURNING FROM 'WHERE NO ONE HAS GONE BEFORE'

by

Teresa Abbott

The Enterprise sped triumphantly through the dark reaches of its own galaxy. Speed - Warp 5 and no faster. After the incredible velocities achieved over the last few hours the pace seemed positively snail-like, but nobody on board the ship was complaining.

On the bridge Counselor Deanna Troi leaned back in her chair, and gradually allowed her mental barriers to firm and shut off the emotions of the other people on board. The love and wellbeing she had monitored during the Traveller's final efforts had been wonderful, but hadn't lasted for long. After the initial surge of relief that the Enterprise had returned to normal space, the crew had quickly returned to its usual preoccupation with more mundane matters, and the only overwhelming emotion she could sense now was the barely suppressed exuberance from Wesley - correction, Ensign Crusher, on her left. That, she could well do without.

Smiling a little to herself, she relaxed, pleased that everything aboard the ship seemed to have returned to normal.

Except in Engineering.

The minutes passed, but Kosinski still sat at the Warp Control Computer, unable to summon up the will to move, let alone to make a decision as to what he should do next. He had always been a confident man - overbearingly so, many would say - but no-one would have ever included self-doubt as one of his weaknesses.

He had expected to feel anger at the way he had been manipulated. Instead, he felt only emptiness and despair. It was as though the very foundations of his being had been destroyed, and unable to come to terms with all that had happened, he sat, at a loss what to do. He acknowledged that he needed time to analyse the situation; unfortunately, Engineering was not the best place to try and do so.

"Move, Kosinski. I need access to that station."

Lieutenant Commander Argyle's voice broke into Kosinski's thoughts. The stocky, bearded Engineer had never pretended to like him, and made no attempt now to disguise the contempt in his manner.

Slowly, Kosinski stood up, and was grateful to find that his features composed themselves out of long habit into something approaching their usual arrogance. A dozen sharp retorts were born in his mind, but somehow he lacked the will to voice them. Pulling himself up to his full height, Kosinski clasped his hands firmly behind his back, and strode without answering from the room.

Now at last he felt the anger rising within him. It grew like a living thing, twisting and gnawing at his insides, swelling up and threatening to choke him.

With great control, he walked along the corridors of the Enterprise, the meticulously placed smile of casual indifference fixed firmly on his face. He knew that all of the crew considered him a fool! He knew that they all despised him, and laughed at him, and pitied him behind his back! He didn't give them another thought. With the irrationality born of rage, all of his hatred was for - HIM, the stranger, the false friend, who had used him, and taken advantage of his position, and then thrown him aside like so much dirt!

Without realising it, the anger had quickened his footsteps, and Kosinski arrived with relief at his quarters. The door slid shut quietly behind him and he wished, not for the first time, that it was one of the old doors one could slam.

Alone at last, he was horrified to feel the sharp sting of tears behind his eyes and, furious with himself, he brushed them away. He would not think about it. He would not contemplate the thoroughness of his degradation.

Crossing to the wall dispenser, he programmed for himself a glass of the synthetic alcohol which was the only sort officially allowed on board. He knew that many of the crew would probably have the genuine article, but he had never needed to use alcohol as a crutch before. The unfamiliar liquid burned in his throat and did nothing for his mood. He ordered another, and then another, and finally sat at the table, nursing the glass in his hands. And despite himself, he began to remember.....

"Mr. Kosinski?"

The female ensign had approached him warily. During the months since he'd joined the U.S.S. Ajax he'd developed a reputation for irritability, and she didn't want to become the innocent target of his anger.

"Mr. Kosinski, I've been asked to introduce you to your new assistant."

Kosinski had straightened up from his work in disbelief. How many times had he told Senior Command that he didn't need, or want, any help?

He'd turned round angrily, but his protest had never reached his lips. The alien standing before him had possessed a stillness, a presence, and with hindsight, Kosinski wondered if even then his mind had been manipulated.

"Do you know anything about propulsion?" Kosinski had deliberately made his voice even more unfriendly than usual.

"A little." The alien's voice was cultured, with unusual modulations, and with more than a trace of amusement in it.

Again, Kosinski found himself at a loss as to how to respond, all the usual questions about the alien's origins and qualifications seemed somehow irrelevant.

Finally, he had gestured to the other computer. "All right. Sit there. We'll see what you can do."

It was as simple as that. The stranger had fitted unobtrusively into the daily life of the laboratory as if he had always been there. Indeed, Kosinski soon came to rely very heavily on his calm, self-effacing support, and looked for him eagerly each day when he arrived at his station.

He couldn't remember exactly when the stranger had suggested to him the variations in the equations. They weren't that different from the work he had been doing, and he had honestly believed that most of them had come from his own mind. And the fact was that they worked! Any slight doubts he may have had disappeared in the aftermath of their success.

And it had been glorious! All of his life, Kosinski had secretly nurtured a belief in his own genius. Now, with this strange assistant by his side, it had finally been recognised. Success followed success. They had improved the Ajax's performance immeasurably. There had been acclaim and curiosity from Starfleet. A transfer to the Fearless. Similar success and praise there.

And finally, the greatest prize of all. The Enterprise. After that, surely his name would go down in the history books as one of the greatest of mankind.

Or that was how it had seemed at the time. Now, finding his mental barriers lowered because of the alcohol, other strange questions began to surface dangerously in his mind.

At what point had he become the follower, rather than the leader?

Why, when the strange alien lay dying in the Enterprise's sickbay, had Kosinski felt such worry and despair?

Why was it to HIM that the alien had turned in the sickbay when he wanted to speak to the Captain, asking permission with his eyes to be left alone, knowing how difficult it would be for Kosinski to leave him?

And why had it mattered so very much that at the end, in that final attempt that had separated them, the Traveller should tell him that he was needed?

Kosinski was not the fool that many people took him for. He would not have been one of Starfleet's top propulsion experts unless he had possessed an above average intelligence. His misfortune was to have developed a character that was very unappealing to his fellow men. Finding most people less able than himself, he treated them with unconcealed contempt and intolerance, and subsequently provoked others to dislike him.

The Traveller had responded to him differently. He had always been quiet and supportive, and had never taken offence at Kosinski's bluntness, whilst contributing to the work they did together with an ability equal to, if not surpassing, Kosinski's own.

Grudgingly, Kosinski was forced to admit to himself that what he was feeling was grief, rather than anger. It was an emotion new to him. Somehow, despite all his efforts to remain aloof, over the weeks an unwilling affection seemed to have sprung up between

himself and the alien, and he knew now that he would sorely miss the Traveller's presence. And having finally realised how pleasant it was to have someone to work with, and share his problems with, how was he ever going to find the strength to carry on alone, and face everyone's dislike and pity?

The door signal sounded, but Kosinski ignored it. There was nobody left on board the ship to whom he wanted to speak.

It sounded again and, exasperated, he activated the entry switch.

The boy - Kosinski couldn't remember the name - stood in the doorway, looking hesitant and unsure of himself.

A great wave of jealousy and dislike rose up within Kosinski. This was the boy who at times the Traveller seemed to prefer to himself. He had allowed him to meddle at the computer console; had summoned him forward at every opportunity. Kosinski swallowed hard against the bitterness in his throat.

"What do you want?" He made the comment as uninviting as possible. He'd be damned if he'd let the boy stand there and gloat over his humiliation.

Wesley cleared his throat, and if Kosinski had cared to look, he would have seen how nervous the youngster was.

"I - came to apologise. I would have come earlier but I was called to the bridge."

"For a reprimand, I hope. For interfering and meddling in things that were not your concern."

The boy shuffled his feet uncomfortably and looked down at the floor. With an instinct too mature for his years, he realised that to tell Kosinski about his own promotion now would be more than the man could bear. Carefully he changed the subject.

"I came to apologise because I may have misjudged you. I admit that at the beginning I didn't think much of your abilities, but he must have chosen you for a reason. And it seemed to me, at the end, that you really cared for him, too." Wesley hesitated, then seemed to make a decision to continue. "I came, because I think that I understand how you must be feeling. I miss him too."

There was a tightness in Kosinski's throat. Out of the mouths of babes! But the bitterness was still inside him, and now it came spilling out.

"He didn't care for me! He used me! YOU were the one he was interested in."

Wesley looked up at him urgently. "He WAS my friend, but he was yours too. He told me himself that you had sensed some part of what he was doing. Without your help, he would never have had access to all the different Starships. And at the end, he needed us both to make the final transition."

With the boy's words, it was as if a tight spring finally uncoiled inside Kosinski, and for the first time since the Traveller's disappearance he relaxed a little. All right, perhaps he had been taken advantage of, but he accepted now that the alien's intentions

had not been deliberately cruel, and maybe they had both gained from the experience.

"Thank you, I appreciate you coming here to say that." Kosinski realised, as he said them, that they were the first nice words he had spoken to anyone in a long, long time. Perhaps it was not too late in his life to learn a whole new way of talking to, and dealing with people.

The boy smiled, and it lit up his face. "I was wondering. I have some free time, and you're an expert in propulsion. Perhaps we could go and have a look at some of his ideas, and try to understand his equations."

"Yes, I'd like that." Kosinski was surprised to find that he meant it. After all, if the Traveller had considered the boy worthy of friendship, perhaps there was more to him than met the eye. And life had to go on, after all. It was only in legend that human and alien were fortunate enough to live out their lives together.

Standing up, he self-consciously directed a thought at the empty room. Of course, there was no-one there to hear it, but if space, and time, and thought....

/I forgive you. And I won't forget./

He knew he must have imagined the answering touch of mind, but it comforted him nevertheless, and with a trace of his former jaunty arrogance, he followed the boy from the room.



NEUTRAL JUSTICE

by

P.J.Poolle

The Romulan cruisers looked like predators. Even with the pitted craters on the upper hull, the *Haarakk* looked like a shark amongst minnows as the Federation engineering shuttles carried supplies out to the point at which the Romulan craft's own service boats took delivery - Wing-leader Swaard had been explicit about the closest safe distance he would permit the station's craft to approach.

Watching the repair work on the *Haarakk*, and the lesser work on Swaard's command cruiser, the *Chaar*, Phillipa Louvois could not help but admire the efficiency with which the Rom crewmembers worked. Three days since the ships had blossomed out of warp and demanded aid from Starbase 143, yet both ships would be ready to launch in only another 6 hours - this despite the gaping wounds on the *Haarakk* and frightful over-crowding on the *Chaar*, playing host not only to refugees from the overtaxed *Haarakk*, but also to survivors from the destroyed sister ship *Kuurt*.

Overcrowded and with a damaged ship, the Romulans had taken the unprecedented step of demanding aid from the Federation Starbase closest to the Neutral Zone. Not asking, not negotiating, but demanding as was their way. After three tense hours in the Command Centre, with the nearest Federation support four days away, Admiral Murikame had agreed the terms of the Romulans stay, and had ordered the station's formidable defences to stand down from red alert.

Rumour and speculation were rife throughout the base, as Starfleet personnel and the smattering of scientists, traders and other civilians on board competed to produce the most outlandish theory to account for the presence of a Romulan battle wing in such battered shape. As one of the three station Captains, Phillipa had been privy to the communications exchanges between Murikame and Swaard, and had been instrumental in setting the terms of this small treaty - allocating shuttle hangers and arranging for supplies for the crew rotated off the *Chaar* whilst the *Haarakk* was made spaceworthy again - medical supplies would have been a problem, given lack of detailed information on the Romulan physiology, but there were few wounded to treat - space battles are draconian when decompression is involved, you either live or die, with no middle ground of injury. Louvois did not want to believe the suggestion by Captain McBroom that the Romulans had spaced their injured... she knew that in some circumstances the realities of survival necessitated using triage techniques, but her impression of Swaard was of a man passionately concerned with the welfare of his people.

Phillipa turned from her study of the view from her office's small port as the door opened. Ensign North came in followed by Lt. Selaar. North was slight, even for an Avalonian, but seemed to be growing in confidence and composure from the terrified nervousness he had evinced when first posted to the JAG office. He saluted crisply, and announced...

"Lt. Selaar, Captain, as requested."

"Thank you Michael, that will be all."

As the door closed behind the departing Ensign, Phillipa studied the Vulcan officer. Attentive but relaxed, with the air of aloofness that never failed to stir a spark of envy in Phillipa's breast - her two years on Vulcan had given her a great respect for the people of that harsh world, and for the way that intellect and mind ruled over their emotional side.

"Please be seated, Lt. Selaar. How are your injuries?" Phillipa seated herself as she spoke, ordering papers on her desktop as she assessed the woman in front of her.

"Thank you, Captain," the younger woman replied, taking the seat before the desk. "The damage is slight, and of no great concern." Despite the certainty in her voice, the livid bruise on her left cheek, and her cautious movements indicated different conclusions to Louvois. Plus she had seen the medical reports.

"As you must be aware, the ramifications of this incident could be far-reaching - I have the reports of the Security team from Shuttle Deck 12, plus footage from the hanger's camera, but in your own words please - what happened?"

Selaar's voice was steady as she replied, clinical and impersonal:

"At 1800 yesterday I was ordered to escort 3 crewmen to Shuttle Deck 12, with food and other supplies for the Romulan crewmembers quartered there. I was to offer medical assistance if required. On arrival, the centurion in charge of the refugees took delivery of our supplies and directed me to the rear of the deck where their medical staff was treating a handful of injured. I went there - "

"Alone?"

"Alone. And was told that the senior medic had returned to the ship, but would be back shortly. I waited, and was... addressed by one of the orderlies in that section."

"Addressed how?"

"Crudely - in a familiar, and sexually suggestive manner."

"Your response?"

"I attempted to leave, stating that I would return later if their medic wished - at that point the orderly grasped me by the arm, and suggested a way in which I could spend time there whilst waiting for the doctor. I resisted and removed the man's hand from my arm, at which point he struck me to the ground and attempted to assault me."

"To assault you? In what manner?"

"I believe his intention was rape, Captain."

The word hung in the air, unpleasant, a thing practically unheard of and unthinkable to civilised Federation beings. Phillipa regarded the young woman before her, and knew that she would reject any offers of sympathy, or overtures of compassion. Knew indeed

that Vulcan mental discipline had doubtless already encased the memory of the trauma, and distanced it to a point where it seemed almost like an event imagined or witnessed in another world. Almost. Louvois felt the stirrings of anger inside her, the same smouldering fires that injustice and unfairness always fanned to flames inside her.

"But his intentions were thwarted?"

"Yes. The centurion had seen the disturbance and came to my assistance. The orderly was taken away and I was escorted from the Shuttle Deck by a Security team. I reported the incident immediately and was then taken to medical for examination and treatment."

Louvois steepled her fingers, and rested her chin on their spire, then took a deep breath and laid her palms flat on the desk top. "Lieutenant, I lived on Vulcan for two years, so do have a knowledge of certain aspects of Vulcan... biology... above that of the average layman. Given the similarities of Vulcan and Romulan physiologies, could the orderly's actions have been a symptom of *pon farr*, or a Romulan equivalent?"

Selaar looked down, not embarrassed, but reluctant to discuss a topic so racially perceived as private.

"It is possible. Indeed, it is the only rational explanation for such irrational behaviour, though the medical details of such a condition in a Romulan are unknown, and though no Vulcan male would ever be allowed in public in such a state... "

Phillipa nodded thoughtfully, then rose from behind the desk and turned to stare once more at the view of the Rom warships.

"Thank you, Lt. Selaar. That will be all for now."

As the junior officer left, she paused by the door and spoke. "Captain, may I ask what you intend to do about this matter?"

Louvois's voice was crystal clear as the window before her, and contained a resolve with about the same tensile strength.

"Uphold the law. And see that justice is served."

After the door hissed shut, Phillipa tapped the intercom panel and spoke. "Michael - get me coffee and sandwiches, then place an urgent call with the Admiral's secretary. I need to speak to him about the assault yesterday. And if you had plans for this evening, cancel them - it's going to be a long night!"

Ignoring the youngster's squeak of compliance, Phillipa turned to her terminal viewer and began to formulate the computer search parameters needed to extract information on Romulan legal procedures and on past cases of extradition from non-Federation planets.....

Admiral Murikame's ready room was small, neat and efficient. It was very similar to the man himself. Phillipa took the tea he offered and sat on the leather couch beneath the ornate scroll on the wall. Herons and a setting sun. Or a rising one. It probably made great artistic difference, but was not a matter that held any

interest for the JAG officer.

Murikame sipped his tea and sat back in the chair, projecting a benign and fatherly image. Louvois was not fooled; benign and paternal he might be, but Starfleet was not in the habit of promoting saintly Orientals to the rank of Admiral, let alone assigning them operational command of Starbases on the fringe of the Neutral Zone.

"I have reviewed the tapes, and your report, Captain. There is no doubt that a serious event occurred. What do you propose to do about it?"

"Procedure says that I take the offending person into custody pending a formal hearing before a tribunal of yourself, his commanding officer and one neutral ship's captain. If convicted he would be sent to a Rehab Centre for therapy to reintegrate him into normal society," she replied. Text book answer, delivered in text book tones. *Your move, Admiral.*

Murikame sighed, and massaged the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb. *He looks tired*, thought Louvois, then smiled internally - after 72 hours of minimal sleep and decisions crucial enough to give a horta ulcers, he was entitled to look tired. She had felt tired just from co-ordinating the logistics of the assistance operation before this particular piece of business had kicked her mind into the cold and tightly focussed mode that legal confrontation always engendered in her - the kind of confrontation that six years of colony contracts and civil litigation had never provided, and which always reminded her that Starfleet was the most worthwhile place to be....

The Admiral spoke. "Attractive as that picture of legal and civilised co-operation might be, I trust that you will accept that it is not a viable option?"

Taking her silence for consent, he continued,

"The *Leningrad* is on her way here at Warp 8, but will not arrive for another 23 hours. The *P'rann'g* is seven hours behind her, with Special Emissary K'Ehleyr on board. The fact that that particularly volatile element is not involved in the situation is probably the only positive aspect of a thoroughly farcical scenario. This base is equipped with defensive weapons systems that could hold off attackers long enough for help to arrive from every planet in the Federation, but has no capability to prevent Sward leaving, let alone to pursue him - even if that was feasible, it would not be... diplomatically acceptable. The Romulans are here, dealing face to face, for the first time in fifty years. I cannot allow anything to jeopardize the rapport that may be beginning here. I cannot and will not have this degenerate into another *T'Omedd* incident."

The *T'Omedd* incident... "Saavik's Blunder" they called it at the Academy. An alliance of expediency between Federation and Rom fleets against the Tholians, ruined by mutual suspicion and arrogance, ending in the destruction of several ships and two colony worlds. Just the mention of that particular piece of Federation history served to refresh Phillipa's perspective on the situation.

"So when the Romulans launch in..." she paused to glance at the walltimer, "...three and a half hours, you propose to allow them to go? With no attempt to bring the criminal to justice?"

Murikame did not respond to the anger in her tone, nor to the fire in her eyes. When he spoke though, it was a Starfleet Admiral she heard.

"Captain, I have discussed this incident with Swaard, who referred it to the Commander of the *Haarakk*, since the offending officer is under his command. That commander, Tebaak by name, categorically refused to surrender his man to Federation jurisdiction. When pressed however, he did agree to discuss the matter face to face with a legal representative, and with the 'alleged' victim. To that end, you will report from here to Captain M'Ress for intelligence briefing and from there you will, in approximately 47 minutes, proceed to the Romulan cruiser *Haarakk*, there to negotiate a mutually satisfactory conclusion to this affair. Clear?"

Deep breath, regain composure. *You do not, repeat not, swear at a superior officer... not aloud, anyway.*

"Aye aye, Sir. Assuming that Lt. Selaar is willing."

"She is. Her response to the opportunity to go aboard the ship was 'Fascinating', I believe." The Admiral rose, and guided Phillipa to the door.

"You will make it clear to... our guests... that we do not allow Federation members to be attacked, by anyone, for any reason, without demanding reparation. You will also, however, do nothing to jeopardize the fragile seeds of peace which we have planted here. Clear?"

"Yes, sir. And thank you for making things so... poetically... plain."

Watching the ramrod stiff back of the departing Captain, Murikame suppressed a smile. Louvois was at her best when focussed thus, primed with just the right degree of anger and outrage, but tempered by the ideals of Starfleet. Truly, she was a fine officer... but for a second, he sympathised with the Romulan who was now firmly fixed in her sights... *Strategy*, he reminded himself, *all is strategy* - but did ever *The Book of 5 Rings* envisage a void as elemental as the one outside *his* castle?

Phillipa watched the Romulan decturion as she piloted the small engineering pod around to the rearmost access dock of the *Haarakk*, noting the differences between her and Selaar, differences of expression, body language and general attitude that left no room for doubt - basic physical similarities aside, the two younger women were from different cultures...

The Romulans are not Vulcans, she reminded herself, echoing the intelligence brief given by M'Ress, the station's Starfleet Intelligence Captain. Remembering the things that she had been told to look for, she watched attentively as the pilot manoeuvred the pod to dock, rapid surefire taps of slender fingers on thruster controls speaking volumes of arrogance and disdain for the autopilot routine a Human pilot would have been required to use. The pod's controls were similar enough to Federation standard that Phillipa knew there were no technological secrets to be gathered by studying them... Knew that, and suspected that part of the reason for Tebaak's refusal to use the Rom transporter was his deliberate awareness of a

need to keep prying eyes at bay. To Hell with that, anyway. She had no interest in espionage and politics; whatever the wily old Caitian might wish her to look for was of secondary interest compared to her reasons for being here... Let Murikame think he had set her up; she had learned in the long years of self-imposed exile from Starfleet that by going along with others she could attain her own objectives, and that this did not have to be the compromise of her integrity that once it might have seemed.

A light above the docking seal flashed blue for safety, and the doors irised open. Nodding curt thanks to the decturion, she moved forward to greet the two Romulans who stood on the other side of the hatch. Selaar followed close behind. As the pod door shut behind them, Phillipa was aware of the alienness of the *Haarakk's* interior - light a little too bright, gravity set too high, angles and curves a subliminal degree wrong for Human perceptions. There was a scent in the air, the metallic tang of recent electrical engineering mingled with a subtler tang of... citrus?... lemon?... spice of some sort? Distracted, Phillipa took a deeper breath, her nose wrinkling as her keen sense of smell tried to catalogue the elusive fragrance. The Romulan in front of her saluted, right fist to left breast, amusement dancing in eyes as black as agate.

"Tebaak, Commander of *Haarakk*. Welcome aboard."

Phillipa resisted an urge to return the salute, instead falling into a 'parade rest' pose, feet apart, hands clasped behind, nodded graciously and spoke.

"Captain Phillipa Louvois, Starfleet Judge Advocate General's Office, and Medical Lieutenant Selaar - the officer assaulted by your crewman." Louvois' voice was cool, clear and calm, betraying not a hint of the effect that the Romulan commander had had on her. The man radiated sheer presence, with an intelligence that intrigued her as much as his obvious arrogance and amusement irritated her. Memories of other Starship Captains flickered in her mind, and for a second or two she wondered if there was something about the job that sculpted the men, or if they needed the qualities before they could do the job.

Tebaak smiled broadly, but the anger in his eyes told her that he had seen her challenge.

"With typical Human zeal, you strike straight from the heart, before I even had time to present Centurion Pkell, our ship's Security Officer. She is the one who would determine if a crewman has transgressed ship's law, and would remand him to me for punishment. She is also my eldest daughter."

Pkell returned Louvois' stare dispassionately, nodding her head the merest fraction as the JAG officer had. Selaar nodded also, and the two junior officers fell into step behind as Tebaak led the party along an empty corridor and into what Phillipa assumed was a briefing room - table, chairs, a view panel. Spartan, in the literal sense, as all the ship appeared to be.

"Commander, let... "

"Captain," he interrupted smoothly, waving a hand to still her attempted continuation, ignoring the anger in her eyes, yet with only seriousness and honesty in his own eyes and voice. "Allow me to save us some time - a commodity of which I have a severely limited supply. I admit our culpability in the case. A crewman from

my ship acted improperly towards a Federation officer, and threatened her with personal violence. We make no pretence of innocence or claims of false accusation or intrigue. The act did occur."

Pkell rose as the door opened, and took a tray holding four crystal glasses and a metal pitcher from the young Romulan who had brought them. By Human reckoning he looked perhaps sixteen or seventeen, yet there was a shine of regen treatment on his cheek and a scorch mark on the chest of his tunic. Phillipa felt his eyes upon her, and returned his gaze quite openly - she saw no hate, but pride and ruthlessness were there, playing companion to a vast curiosity. She smiled courteous thanks to the youngster as he left, unspeaking, unsmiling.

As Pkell poured distilled water into each glass and placed each glass before one of the people in the room, Louvois contemplated her response to Tebaak's admission, and faced her growing conviction that these people were not her enemies unless she chose to make them so - and that they would be terrible enemies to face if such were her choice!

"Commander, Officer Pkell, I thank you for your courtesy," she paused, half toasted each in turn, sipped the insipid water, "and for your candour. Our law requires that the criminal be handed over to us for treatment. I assume that this is not an option you would readily accept?"

"Treatment! Federation mind-bending! Of course we will never accept such a demand." Pkell's anger was plain to see, but her father waved her to silence as imperiously as he had the JAG officer earlier.

"My apologies, Phillipa Louvois, for the rashness of youth - the tales we hear are doubtless... overstated, but my daughter speaks correctly for all that. I cannot surrender D'Ken, by order of my Wing-leader, and would not if I could. The options before us are limited - our ships launch in 2 hours, station time, and all our personnel will be aboard. All I can offer is the fact that D'Ken has been punished under our laws. That will have to suffice."

Phillipa smiled, the smile of a tiger, and looked Tebaak deep in the eyes.

"Commander, you can scarcely imagine that the Federation will simply allow you to tell us, the injured party, what we must accept!" As Tebaak leaned forward over the table, anger genuinely burning in his gaze as he drew breath to respond, she waved him to silence with a perfectly mimicked copy of his own gesture and continued. "But for the sake of... peaceful... and productive co-operation, and as a starting point in this negotiation, what punishment would your laws offer?"

The fire in his eyes was warmth to her heart as he replied, though not a trace showed in his voice, "We seem to be communicating poorly - these are not negotiations, and the appropriate sentence has already been carried out on the crewman in question; Romulan justice is swift and sure. D'Ken was flogged on return to the ship - 10 lashes, with the rod set at level five."

Phillipa kept her face impassive only through a lifetime's training and courtroom experience.

"Unbelievable!" The exclamation came, almost unbelievably, from Selaar.

"You *dare* to question our word!?! " snarled Pkell. Even as she spoke she rose, flipped a switch on the viewscreen, and uttered a long string of Romulan commands. The screen misted, then cleared to show what was presumably a closed off portion of the *Haarakk's* sickbay. A Romulan hung suspended in a zero-g pillar, naked but for the breechcloth style garment around his loins. He appeared comatose, and a liquid feed of some kind hung in the pillar with him, connected by a clear tube to his left thigh. The livid weals on his back and chest were painful just to observe. The security holo that Phillipa had seen of the assault had been of less than excellent quality, from a static recorder on the far side of the hanger. What in that had been a hulking brute in body armour, in close-up looked more like an elven saint, martyred by savages. Delicate bones and pale skin, of a boy who was not - could not be - more than a year or so older than the youth who had brought their refreshments.

Selaar was silent, her whole being focussed on the image. Phillipa forced herself to show nothing, not anger, not satisfaction, not contempt, not fear - Gods, not fear! - as she looked at Tebaak. He was equally impassive, unmoved and unmoving, sculpted from rock and steel, but in his eyes... the very depths of his eyes... was what? Compassion? Sorrow? No, it was, she was sure, an almost empathic sharing of the young man's pain.

Keeping her voice calm she spoke. "The beating was so severe that he requires medical treatment? Or do you inflict a beating and then suppress the pain of his cuts and bruises?"

Tebaak blinked, as lions blink before the hunt, and spoke.

"Rest assured that he feels every stripe in full - and that normally he would be back at his duty station. The medication is to ease him through the remainder of the... cycle... that prompted his assault."

Phillipa breathed deeply, but somehow still maintained her cool appearance.

"So it was *pon farr* - or your equivalent?"

Pkell flushed, and looked away. Tebaak's eyes widened, then hooded over. He nodded once, sharply.

"Did it not occur to you that that gave room for a plea of mitigating circumstance?"

Storms and lightning rolled in Tebaak's voice. "Romulans do not plead, Human! D'Ken's lifemate was slain in the attack that forced us here. The madness can come without warning in such cases; yet he should not have broken ship's orders by giving ground for any confrontation with you Federation *bereetuu*, whatever the circumstance."

Federation sheep? Right, you arrogant son-of-a-sthondat, right, thought Louvois, we could have left things here, but for what you just revealed, you bloody well pay!

"So that is the truth of why your man was chastised - not for criminal assault on a Federation citizen, but for disobeying

orders?"

Tebaak could sense the ground shifting, but would not lie to avoid it. Looking the Human straight in the face, he smiled politely, and said as if stating the blindingly obvious to an idiot,

"Of course!"

Tebaak glared at Louvois. Louvois glared at Tebaak. Selaar continued to regard the wounded man on the monitor. Pkell looked first at her father, then at the older Human, then back to her father. Without knowing why, she felt uneasy.

After thirty seconds of awkward silence, Phillipa laughed, a clear peal of apparently genuine amusement.

"So, Commander Tebaak, you tell me that the Federation must accept the justice meted out by Romulan law, but neglect to apply that law to the crime in question... Inadequate, Commander, inadequate!"

Tebaak placed his hands palm down on the table, and lowered his head slightly. He took a deep breath and then slowly released it, regarding Louvois throughout from under hooded brows, he spoke.

"Your suggestion, Captain?"

For a moment she sympathised with the man - *What Hell has he been through these past six days? How many of your men have died? How hard is it for you to take aid from Humans?* But then her sense of purpose reasserted itself.

"Commander, if you will excuse me, I have duties in Weapons Control that I should be attending to... "

Before Tebaak could answer Pkell's request, Phillipa spoke to prevent her escape.

"Please stay - your knowledge of ship's law may help us. In my brief research of Vulcan legal precedent for such... incidents... I found mention of *ahn'ahludd'arak* - do the Romulans retain this custom?"

Behind her, she sensed Selaar turn her focus from screen to conversation, sensed shock again from the unshockable. *Innocent girl, to think that a people's reticence to discuss some things would prevent a skilled investigator from unearthing unpleasant truths* - unearthing truth, pleasant or not, was the closest thing Phillipa Louvois would permit herself to a religion. Selaar's response however, was as nothing compared to that of the young Romulan girl. She opened her mouth. Closed it, then turned to her commander and said with some desperation,

"Father...!"

Tebaak rose to his feet, impressive, imperious, then moved to stand behind his daughter. Placing his hand on her shoulder, he looked at Phillipa.

"My daughter is reluctant to help you entrap me - but the answer is yes, we do retain the old right of revenge combat. Our parting from our Vulcan ancestors was thousands of years ago, but this particular... ceremony... is as old as the species itself. In

high-caste families, if this regrettable situation occurs, it is still an acceptable solution. I congratulate you on the thoroughness of your research, Captain, but surely one as... civilised... as our young Vulcan cousin here would not wish to... sully... herself with such 'barbarism'? Even if she had blood-kin willing to enforce the claim?"

Selaar opened her mouth, but before she could say a word to substantiate Tebaak's hypothesis, Louvois spoke.

"As you were, Lieutenant! Come, come, Commander, surely you appreciate that as a serving officer in Starfleet the Lieutenant will do as she is ordered, and that as a soldier in an army, the leaders of that army stand as her family and may appoint whatever champion they wish!"

"Yes. That had... slipped my mind. Thank you for reminding me! Tradition does however allow for time for the male involved to recover from the madness before the battle. In this case, that will take several days that we do not have available!"

Sensing rebellion growing in Selaar, Phillipa turned to face the young Vulcan, and winked, a gesture unseen by the Romulans, and incomprehensible if it were seen by them, but surely one that Selaar would understand.

The JAG officer smiled broadly, and rose decisively to her feet.

"Then all we need to do is set the time and place for you to bring your man when he is recovered - that will give the Admiral time to select our champion. I am sure that the competition for that honour will be brisk, particularly amongst our Klingon allies!"

Anger and shock battled for pride of place in Tebaak's face, whilst Pkell seemed to be attempting to wish her way through the deck plates rather than continue to bear witness to the proceedings.

"You... *dare*... to suggest that we deliver our young medical orderly to be *butchered* by one of your *Klinzhai*'s animals!?" The outrage in Tebaak's voice was almost tangible.

Louvois' voice in return was the ice cold whipcrack that brooks no denial.

"I dare nothing. I suggest nothing. I *demand* what you have already offered! Romulan justice, under Romulan law, for a crime against this woman, committed by a Romulan! All as stipulated and agreed by yourself! His life is mine to claim, is it not?"

The silence hung there, undisturbed and uncompromising.

"Is it not?" Phillipa repeated after several moments.

Tebaak turned to face the monitor, looked at the anguished face of the young man under his command, turned to face the Human and replied, "Yes, his life is yours. Name the time and place. If we survive the hunt we are about to undertake, I swear I will bring him there."

Curiously, Phillipa felt no flush of victory, only a surge of empathy for this proud, proud man, forced by his own innate honour and justice to agree to a thing that so obviously cost him so

dearly.

"Commander, we are all rational beings here - we have our laws, our truths, our ideals and honour, to lift us up from our animal origins to be all that we can be. It is the judgement of Starfleet that due to mitigating circumstances of a medical nature, your crewman has no case to answer on the assault charge. And that your shipboard discipline is adequate - more than adequate - penalty for any public affray or unruly behaviour in the hangar deck. I therefore return custody of your crewman to yourself, as his commanding officer, and will mark this case as closed. If that is satisfactory to all parties concerned?"

Selaar nodded, Pkell looked dumbstruck, and Tebaak clasped his hands behind him and rocked on the balls of his feet before speaking.

"You just give him back. Just like that."

Louvois smiled, this time a genuine smile, and seeing the true warmth of it, Tebaak wondered how he could have mistaken her earlier roleplaying for truth...

"Personally, I would have liked to make you ask me for it - but it's a well known fact that Romulans do not plead!"

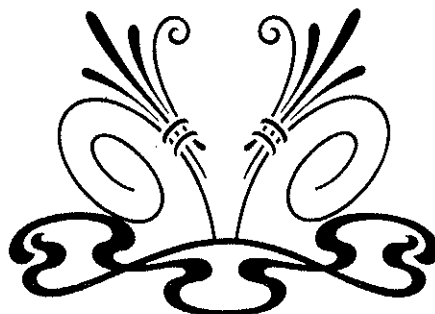
Three voices and one eyebrow raised in laughter, then Selaar spoke to Tebaak.

"Sir, you mentioned treatments to assist in easing the strains of *pon farr* - it is possible that these might be of interest to me, and that certain techniques we know might be of use to your medical people. If these are not classified matters, perhaps we could arrange...?" Her voice tailed off optimistically.

"An excellent idea - Pkell, escort the Lieutenant to Clinical, and assist her in an exchange of unclassified information. Let it not be said, Captain," turning as he spoke to face Phillipa, "that we are so easily outdone in magnanimous gestures. Let these youngsters tend to that, and perhaps you will take a stronger beverage than water with me until it is time for you to return to the station?"

"An honour, Commander, and perhaps we can also find... a neutral topic of conversation?" Again, the smile took the sting from the words.

"Why not, Captain, why not? Surely there can be no harm in a belief in the possibility of miracles?"



NICKNAMES

by

Marcia Pecor

The young midshipman sat rigidly at the table, awaiting permission to pick up his fork and eat, and let his mind wander.

Damned stiff-necked Academy rules! his great-grandfather had fussed during a recent visit home. Well, he couldn't very well blame Papa Len for a long-cultivated dislike of the military - the man had spent a lifetime serving in it.

So what was he doing here at the Academy, 19 years old, grass-green as the rest of the midshipmen who sat at this table? It wasn't the first time he had asked himself that question, as he endured the rigorous and often humiliating training of a Federation Starfleet Academy plebe.

The answer was simple - the wanderlust. His grandmother, who had raised him from childhood, groaned over the recognised trait. Said she'd seen it before, and what it did to people who suffered from it. There was only one cure... deep space. Reluctantly, proudly, and with a little fear, she had let him go. Grandma Jo knew it would have done the boy no good to try to hold him back, to dissuade him from his calling, even though she had secretly hoped he would follow in the footsteps of his ancestors and become a doctor.

Once, during a visit to the seaside where her dad now resided, she had expressed her wish that the youth had chosen a medical career rather than that of command. The old gentleman told her in no uncertain terms that the boy had to make his own way. "God knows I certainly took a sharp turn or two in my career. All I wanted to be was a country doctor..."

"And now you're a semi-retired Admiral, the most revered of the medical prototypes, the most-read in the journals, the most..."

"Puffed up, egotistical old coot on Terra, if you keep that up," he quipped, never comfortable with high praise, not even from his own daughter. "Now you let that boy alone, Joanna. It'll break his heart if he thinks you disapprove."

"I don't disapprove," she murmured, gazing out over a calm sea. "I just know what's in store."

McCoy squeezed her hand affectionately. "And so do I, Joanna girl. I spent half my career running after one just like him, trying to keep him physically and emotionally healthy. I pity his Chief Medical Officer!"

"Oh, Dad, you silly! You don't even know who he is," Joanna laughed, patting her father's cheek.

"True, but he's out there, somewhere, perhaps even now in the throes of medical training. If he thinks he's having a hard time

now, just wait until he finds himself in the service!"

"Or *she*," teased Joanna.

The old gentleman and his centenarian daughter laughed softly together, the shared memories of the two lifetimes a gentle reassurance that though things changed in the course of time, in many ways they remained comfortably the same.

"Man, of all the rotten luck!" exclaimed Clave Zanders, one of J.T.'s three room-mates and fellow lackeys. He laid a sympathetic hand on his young friend's shoulder as they reviewed that week's roster of various cleaning assignments, KP duty, upper-classmen attendance, and other Academy kiss-ass tradition which must be juggled with a full class load and drill time. Papa Len had been lucky to avoid all this, but he was cast in a different mould, after all. His service in the Fleet was a strange marriage which had not been pondered for the last time. But even so, command was a separate road altogether. And if it was one of the obstacles and irrationalities which must be overcome, the Academy was certainly the proving ground for it.

"What's wrong, Clave? You get to polish Sebastian's boots for him this week?" The malodorous condition of the upper-classman's footwear was the source of many an off-colour joke in midshipmen's quarters.

"Look again, J.T. *You've* got diplomatic duty in the front offices all week," smirked the red-haired plebe, his freckles a riot across his nose and cheeks. "And with exams coming up, too."

"Damn!"

Diplomatic duty simply meant standing at attention for hours at a time at the main doors of the Academy, serving as guide, information assistant, and busboy to anyone who might require assistance in the vast complex. Since no one but Academy professors, auxiliary personnel and sometimes, rarely, a representative from Starfleet or diplomat on an official visit came through those doors, diplomatic duty meant keeping one's feet planted firmly on the floor, hands planted equally firmly behind one's back, and yawns clandestinely stifled. It also meant that it was impossible to sneak in any study time. Unexcused absence from duty meant immediate expulsion from the Academy and, like guard duty in the U.S. armed forces of the twentieth century, there was no such thing as excused absence.

The dark haired plebe sighed fatalistically. "Guess that means I won't be going home this weekend."

He would have to use the free hours of an off-duty weekend to study for the upcoming exams. It meant missing a long anticipated visit with his great-grandfather, but Papa Len, of all people, would understand. He wouldn't *like* it, but he would understand. J.T. chuckled to himself as he strode back to his room, his freckled friend staring after him in silent sympathy.

"McCoy, J.T., reporting for duty, Ma'am."

Retired navigator Alvea Curoe glanced up, barely able to

suppress a smile, at the young midshipman who stood at attention before her desk. These kids were so *stiff* - but then, so had she been a half-century ago.

"You're twenty seconds late, McCoy. I won't report it this time, but don't let it happen again. Assume your duties, Midshipman."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The blue-eyed plebe marched stiffly to his post at the entrance. Although Curoe attended to her own duties, she kept an eye on the fellow. In her eyes, all plebes at this post were *her* responsibility, in every way conceivable. As they came to know her over their sojourn at the Academy, she became mentor, confidant, even mother, to many of them. She ruled them with an iron hand, but she commanded their respect and love, as well.

This one would have his hands full tomorrow. The Captain of the newly commissioned Enterprise was to visit the Academy as part of a publicity/public awareness hoopla which would be going on all week and the poor plebe would be required to escort him.

Damned stupid, if you ask me, she fumed, knowing exams were coming up. *Well, there's no accounting for propaganda*. She had served in the Fleet in one capacity or another for many years, but it didn't mean she had to pretend she understood it.

Damned stupid waste of time, brooded Captain Jean-Luc Picard, mirroring Starfleet Academy Chief Secretary Curoe's private opinion of the matter. Without enthusiasm he watched the Academy complex loom before the aircar as they approached the landing pad. The Captain, though used to the often unnecessary glitz and mundaneness of diplomacy and PR, had never grown to like it. Unfortunately, those powers which be in higher places deemed it a necessary duty of command personnel holding rank of Captain or above, so he must resign himself to this stopover before he could assume his new command. Nothing could have pleased him less.

Therefore it was with some disgruntlement that Picard approached the entrance to Starfleet Academy and found himself attended by a dark-haired, blue-eyed wonder who swallowed so hard it was audible. Picard could feel the man's anxiety, and it only served to irritate him further. He barely spoke to the youth when Secretary Curoe introduced them, and started off at a brisk pace, the young man hurrying to match his stride.

For two days McCoy was Picard's escort, accompanying him to training exhibitions, lectures, and small gatherings such as this one they were currently attending of upper-classmen and new graduates decked out in the regalia of ensign for the first time. J.T. eyed the uniforms hungrily for, though they were without any insignia of rank, they were Starfleet uniforms - not Academy jumpsuits - in the burgundys, golds, and blues of various selected fields of service. Of particular interest to him was the burgundy of command.

Picard, though outwardly suave and the epitome of protocol, endured the hours with gritted teeth. He should be on board the

Enterprise, supervising final preparations for her maiden flight. Commander Riker, his second in command, would not report for duty until the ship left space dock, so the Captain could not count on his expertise. Without the luxury of a First Officer on board, he felt his absence from the bridge nothing short of dereliction of duty. This did nothing to lighten his mood.

"Mr. McCoy."

The young man stood at his elbow, admiring the new ensigns who crowded the room, and did not hear Picard.

"Midshipman!"

"Aye, sir!"

J.T. turned quickly, startled at the Captain's tone, and knocked the officer's drink from his hand as cleanly as a golf swing.

It sailed in a perfect arc before gravity pulled it from its flight and deposited it neatly in the lap of a visiting dignitary, a parent of one of the graduates. She welcomed its landing with a healthy yelp of anger, glaring vehemently at Picard who stood with his mouth open and his hand clutching empty air.

J.T. blushed hotly, embarrassment and anger battling for control, but he stood his ground, waiting for a rebuke. Instead, Picard walked over to the woman and apologized eloquently with a formal bow. Then he walked back to the youth and said, *sotto voce*,

"Let's get the hell out of here before we get into more trouble."

The midshipman nodded the affirmative and followed Picard out of the room.

Once out in the hall, the Captain hesitated for a moment, as if uncertain where to go. On impulse, J.T. spoke up, the first time he had attempted to initiate any conversation with his important charge.

"Captain Picard, would you like to *really* get out of here for a while?"

To his amazement, the Captain's face brightened. "Is that possible?"

Having found his tongue again, McCoy felt less intimidated around Picard. He motioned for them to follow the west corridor.

"Yes, sir. There is a place 20km down the beach. Nothing fancy, but quiet and off-limits to Academy students."

Picard stopped and scowled at him before J.T. reassured him, "It's permissible if I'm attending a Starfleet officer... sir."

"Oh, is that how it works? How long...?"

"You don't have another appointment for one hour, 35 minutes, Captain," interjected the young man, quickly checking his schedule.

"In that case, I'm in your hands."

"Aye, sir,"

The room was dark, lighting at a minimum, conducive to conversation or whatever else went on there. Picard cradled his non-alcoholic drink between his hands, deeming it inadvisable to consume ethanol before the next lecture. The mock Sauvignon did nothing to satisfy his palate - if anything, it was giving him a dry mouth. He elected to leave it on the table before him so the waiter wouldn't inquire if he wanted another. The midshipman's soft drink was untouched.

The young man had seemed to lose his awkwardness briefly back there in the corridor, but it had returned as Picard watched him from across the table. Away from the hustle and irritation of his Academy regime, Jean-Luc saw that the young man had something on his mind and perhaps thought it a breach of etiquette to bother him with it. He remembered his own Academy days and the naked intimidation that came with confronting a person of rank.

"I see you are a first year plebe, Mr. McCoy," he began. "Final exams for this term should be coming up soon, if memory serves."

"Yes, sir. Next week."

"No doubt they are as difficult now as they were when I attended the Academy - probably more so."

"Yes, sir."

Damn! This is like pulling communication relays! Picard cleared his parched throat and stared with dismay at his glass. "What I'd give for a *real* Sauvignon right now," he muttered.

To his surprise, the youth's face was transformed with a grin.

"Have I just said something amusing, Mister?" growled Picard, but humour was in his eyes.

"Yes, sir. Forgive me, but I was reminded by what you said of a close relative. He was a connoisseur of ethanolic beverages, too, though of a harder nature." McCoy chuckled. "He doesn't partake now - says he's outgrown such foolishness - but the way you complained about your drink reminded me sharply of him just now." J.T.'s face sobered. This was perhaps not the proper thing for him to be discussing with the Captain. "I was supposed to visit him this weekend, and I suppose I've been thinking about him a lot."

Picard raised his eyebrows in understanding. "Ah, and your tryst with me has interfered with those plans, I take it. You'll have little time to study for finals playing tour guide to a pompous dignitary." He raised his hand to silence the protesting youth. "Believe me, I remember the frustrations of the first year quite well." The Captain studied the table for a while, his finger playing absent-mindedly across his lip. "Perhaps something could be arranged so you can devote more time to your studies, Mr. McCoy."

"No, sir."

Picard glanced up sharply, astonished at the young man's answer. McCoy's blue eyes flashed, his jaw set stubbornly.

"With all due respect, Captain Picard, I cannot accept preference of any kind. I have been assigned to attend you during the course of your schedule this week, and to neglect such a duty, especially when... "

"Who said anything about preference? You forget to whom you are speaking, McCoy. I will make allowances because you cannot be expected to understand my motives, our acquaintance being limited, but you will hold your tongue and hear me out."

Properly rebuked, J.T. sat straight in his chair and listened as the Captain explained he would prefer to have a graduate aide for the rest of the tour, someone with whom Picard could discuss the more intricate details of Academy-trained personnel making the transition from school to service. This could only be possible through having a graduated ensign attend him. Surely the Academy would see the logic of such an arrangement - if not, he had a few other strings to pull to make them see it his way.

"Besides," he finished, having checked his chronometer and discovered it was time to return to the Academy, "with a brand new ensign in tow, I have good reason to give him a grand tour of the Enterprise."

And see if she's as ready for flight as you are, thought McCoy, as they moved out into the bright sunlight. This man, though different in many ways from himself, was driven by the same force. They were alike, though dissimilar, and the common chord had been struck. J.T. wished he had more opportunity to get to know Picard, but realized that was impossible. He had two more years of training after this one and many subsequent years of accumulated experience to tuck under his belt before he would be ready for command. Picard would be hundreds of light years away, on a ten-year mission.

Impulsively, realizing he might never have the chance again, J.T. stuck out his hand. "Thank you, sir. I've... It's been a pleasure to attend you, even for a short while."

Picard took the young man's hand. "McCoy. What's your full name, Midshipman?"

"James T. McCoy, sir. But my friends call me J.T."

"Nicknames are usually dropped by those in command, Mr. McCoy."

They climbed into the aircar, and Picard's attention was diverted to his lecture. He wanted to go over his notes as they made the short trip back to the Academy.

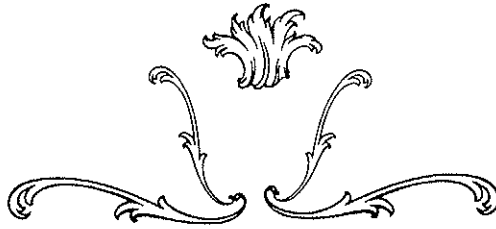
J.T. did not attempt further conversation. He recognized the preoccupation of the Captain and its larger meaning: little time for friendship. Picard was not the first Captain to be so isolated and he would not be the last. Perhaps one day J.T. would find himself in such a situation. But for now...

He guided the aircar expertly toward the north, keeping the ride smooth for Picard. He was a good pilot. A good student, too. And some day he'd make a *damned* good Captain. But for now he was content to transport his passenger safely, and to keep his nickname.

Besides, all nicknames weren't bad or unprofessional.

Ones like 'Bones'.

Ones like 'Jim'.



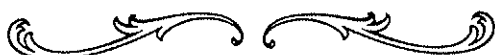
WHAT WILL HAPPEN NOW?

Did it really happen, Tasha?
 Did you really get out of uniform
 And into something quite different
 Just for me?
 Did you really ask me
 For gentleness and joy and love?
 Did your pulse really start to quicken
 When I told you that I was indeed
 Fully functional in every way?
 Did you really respond so warmly
 To an android's mechanical caresses?
 And did I really begin to forget
 That I am only a machine?
 Did we really become lovers, Tasha?
 Did it really happen?

I know it happened.
 My systems
 For information storage and retrieval
 Are far superior to Human memory
 And I remember everything I experience
 With complete accuracy.
 I know it happened, Tasha,
 But I need to know
 That you know it happened too.
 I know it happened
 But without your confirmation
 How can I *feel* it happened?

And what will happen now, Tasha?
 What will you say to me
 When you come on to the bridge?
 How will you acknowledge
 The change in our relationship?
 I am quite unskilled in these matters.
 And while I stand and wait here on the bridge
 Despite the certainty
 Of the memories stored within me
 A part of me remains unsure.
 I know it happened, Tasha,
 But I do not know what will happen now.

Ann Peters



ILLUSIONS

by

Gail Christison

Captain Jean-Luc Picard emerged reluctantly from behind the leather bound edition of Shakespearean sonnets. It had been a long and exasperating week.

Commander Will Riker paused just inside the door.

"Yes, Number One, what is it?" Picard growled, swinging his bare legs to the side of his bunk.

"Captain, we've been ordered to the Theta Majoris system."

"Theta? I know that system. It has only one habitable planet, and that is closed, possibly for as long as five hundred years. Shalamar is quite primitive."

"Exactly," Riker continued. "And now we have to find out why their development has leap-frogged several hundred of those years."

"I see." Picard stood up, smoothing down his black silk robe.

A little of the tension went out of Riker.

"Sit down, Will. I take it we have a suspect?"

Riker watched the Captain disappear into the bathroom, his big fingers tapping idly on the recording of Starfleet's transmission.

"Ferengi. They've been extremely active in the area."

"Ah, yes." Picard emerged, the torso of his uniform hanging from his waist.

Riker smiled inwardly at the actual slenderness of shoulders so well able to carry the weight of command.

"The topaline deposits."

"It seems logical. With the Capellan deposits running out and the heavy Klingon demand, the prices on the black market have soared. The deposits of Faranax II and promising exploration on Omicron Vega IX mean that the demand will be short term, and the Ferengi have never been known to be slow to cash in, no matter how fast they have to work."

Deep in thought, Picard shrugged into the uniform and started for the door.

"Number One?" he said quietly, without turning.

"Sir?" Riker was only a step behind.

"Why are you here personally?"

"Captain, it's Christmas. We were supposed to get shore leave - I thought you would want to tell them. And... I... well, Dr. Crusher only cleared you three days ago... "

"Will, I appreciate your concern." Picard turned. "But I'm perfectly well."

Both were uncomfortably aware that the Captain had suffered residual headaches and nightmares since almost being killed by an alien weapon on Andrius II. It was a bare three weeks since the incident. In Riker's opinion, far too recently, in the circumstances.

"As you wish, sir," he replied doubtfully, and followed Picard's brisk step into the corridor.

"Shalamar is populated by beings whose development is approximately equal to that of sixteenth century Earth. Theirs is basically a feudal system supported by extensive agriculture and husbandry. There is no uniting monarchy, only a plethora of princes and provincial rulers. They quarrel incessantly, both nationally and amongst themselves, resulting in bloody battles and a shockingly high mortality rate." Data paused in his recitation for a beat, to study the faces of the group at the briefing room table. Having stored each reaction instantly, to examine at a later date, he continued.

"Their weapons consist almost entirely of swords, staffs and knives, although there is a formidable garotte and an assassin's blade. That is a curved knife quite similar to those used by early middle-eastern tribes on Earth to slip silently into the enemy's camp at night and slit the throats of sleeping victims."

Wesley swallowed involuntarily. Riker suppressed a grin with difficulty.

"Very interesting, Data, but let's save the history lesson for another time."

The android's eyebrows rose inquiringly, but he continued smoothly.

"Very well, sir. The Shael's are a minimally divergent humanoid race, caucasoid, with all the usual variations. Infiltration should not be difficult. Team members must, however, be fully conversant with Shaelian customs and law. One error could result in grave injury or summary execution." He frowned at the looks of consternation on their faces but went on. "For example, any approach, however innocent, by a member of the opposite gender to the spouse of a Shael is considered adulterous and therefore punishable by death in combat, usually sword play or hand to hand combat, culminating in the garotting of the loser. There is no discernible difference in the social position, or indeed, the strength, of Shael women and Shael men, apart, of course, from the natural variation between individuals."

At this Picard turned darkly to his First Officer. "Your recommendations for the Away Team, Number One?"

"Two, sir," Riker said confidently.

"Two?!" Worf exclaimed at a regrettable volume. "Sir, you will need at least.."

"Lieutenant!" barked Picard.

Riker fixed an eye on the unrepentant Security Officer.

"The larger the Away Team the more likely there is to be a mistake. In order to complete this reconnoitre without violation of the Prime Directive or loss of life, I recommend that the team consist of myself and - " The blue eyes shifted to the pale android features of Lt. Cmdr. Data. "Data."

"Data?" It was Picard's turn to be surprised.

Riker smiled. "Yes, sir. I have been assured by ship's stores and certain of the crew expert in such matters - " his smile extended to Deanna Troi and Beverly Crusher - "that Data's appearance can be sufficiently altered - temporarily - for him also to pass as a Shael."

Murmurs of doubt echoed around the table. Geordi muttered something unpleasant under his breath. Data himself had gone into a brown study, his thoughts inaccessible to even the most discerning onlooker.

Picard's mood was sombre. "You are certain of this, Number One? Were Data to be discovered, the consequences could be far worse than any law broken by a careless security guard."

Worf's lips threatened to draw into a full-blooded snarl.

"Yes, sir. Positive." Riker rushed on. "Of all of us, Data is the best able to defend himself against hand to hand violence. Also, since the Away Team will not be able to carry instruments of any kind, Data will assume as many of those responsibilities as possible, except communications. Ship's stores will ensure that a shirt button on each of our costumes is replaced by a communicator. Even more importantly, Data is an expert on these people, this culture. The mission's chances of success must increase geometrically with his presence."

Picard appeared to consider the statement for a time. "Agreed," he said finally, his features still vaguely troubled. He allowed his gaze to follow everyone else's.

And the golden eyes of Lt. Cmdr. Data returned their regard with the same troubled look.

"You see, his own hair has such a natural texture and fall that it only required re-styling." Troi stood back to admire her handiwork.

Riker, arms crossed, looked amused but satisfied.

"Well, Data?" he said gently, watching his friend's face in the mirror.

"Curious, sir. It has never occurred to me to change my physical appearance. I find it... unsettling."

Riker sobered, met a concerned glance from the Counselor. Beverly Crusher chose that moment to return from the sickbay lab.

"We've done it!" the Doctor announced, practically bursting through the unsecured door and making a bee-line for the android.

The difference was stunning. Within minutes, Data's face had been transformed. Riker sucked in his breath and Troi chewed her bottom lip.

"This stuff requires a combination of three chemicals to remove it. There's enough here for you to finish the job yourself, once we can see the general effect on your face," Crusher told Data, with a medic's lack of self consciousness.

"Of course, Doctor." Data's eyes were riveted on the mirror as she graduated the colour into his hairline.

"Prosthetics came up with a colour best suited to Data's hair colour, and they're confident that they'll stay in place," Crusher went on, producing a tiny case containing coloured contact lenses.

"Why did you not simply synthesize complete units using the transporter pattern for my own eyes, Doctor?"

Beverly regarded the floor broodingly, then looked across at Riker almost accusingly.

"You're not a mannequin, Data. Nobody here has the right to ask you to change parts like some... "

"Machine," Riker finished, and was aware that Deanna had moved closer to him. "Data, I'm sorry. Doctor Crusher is right." Troi's fingers closed around his arm. "I need you on this mission - badly - but I should've discussed all this - " he gestured - "with you first."

Data finished inserting the second lens, blinked twice, then faced them all. The effect was electric, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Sir, you have studied the history of all the ships named Enterprise, have you not?"

"Uh? Oh, yes." Riker stirred from the stunned silence that had overtaken all of them.

"Then you are aware that Captain James T. Kirk, on the first Starship Enterprise, was himself once surgically altered to look like a Romulan?"

Troi smiled.

A look of great affection transformed Riker's sombre face. "Understood Commander... and thanks," he said softly.

Silently, Crusher's hands went to Data's shoulders. She swivelled him back to the mirror. "Well?" she said wryly "What do you think?"

Chief O'Brien stared, conspicuous by his silence. In his

transporter room, the Captain and Commander Riker stood, studying a third man.

The young man was brown haired, brown eyed and slightly tanned. He was lean and hard, and his hair, although slightly long, was worn in a contemporary style. Wearing white shirt, brown pants and boots, as Riker was, Data seemed so Human that O'Brien's unease grew.

That feeling troubled him. Like the rest of the Enterprise crew, he regarded Data as a respected officer, with not a little affection and a great deal of protectiveness. He was not prepared for his own unpleasant reaction to the android's transformation.

A few feet away, and equally as troubled, Jean-Luc Picard faced his two officers.

"You were right, Number One. They did a fine job. And you Data? How do you feel about all this?"

Data watched the gesture of Picard's hand.

"In truth... most disquieted, sir. It should not bother me, and yet..."

"I understand," Picard headed him off. "However, I have full confidence in both of you. Now it's time you left." His expression gentled as Data turned toward the platform. Riker recognised it and smiled back before turning himself.

"Number One?"

"Yes, Captain?" he replied from the platform.

"Make damn sure you're both at that rendezvous point in three days from now. I want the pair of you back in one piece."

O'Brien watched Picard wheel and stride out before they could reply.

"Ready, sirs?" he said.

"Energise," Riker answered.

An afternoon zephyr swirled through the field of long pasture grass and ruffled the grey-green foliage of the giant weeping trees. Insects twittered and shrilled in the afternoon sun and wind-borne, feathery seed capsules floated by the two figures materialising on a rocky knoll.

Riker surveyed the sea of grass, lifted his eyes to the warm golden sun and the expanse of blue sky. He swallowed. Then the pang of homesickness was gone as quickly as it had been born.

"Beautiful," he said aloud.

"Yes," Data agreed as he turned in an arc. "But *that* is not."

Riker also turned to face the eastern horizon. Only a few kilometres away was a settlement, both unremarkable and unlovely.

"There?"

"Yes. It is the settlement first reported by the survey team to be contaminated.

"Does it have a name?" They scrambled off the mound.

"Greystone," replied Data.

"Well, that's original." Riker rolled his eyes as they set off toward the village.

Riker's nostrils pinched. It smelled. It was dirty and damp and insect ridden. He watched several small children chase a furry animal into an alley. They were filthy and unkempt. Most of the visible adults dressed as the Enterprise men did, but many seemed as destitute as the ragged children. A constant stream of effluent trickled down the street.

"All of these buildings are made of a combination of stone and organic material. They are a little more primitive than the records indicate," Data opined, as the remains of someone's breakfast swirled by. He stepped gingerly over the ditch and indicated a not too narrow side-street showing signs of commercial activity.

"No kidding?" Riker followed him, dodging low-slung clothes lines and protruding business signs, as the lane narrowed. "Not very tall either, are they?" he added sarcastically, as the line he had just snapped sprang back, draping him with an assortment of feminine attire.

"On the contrary, Comman - " For an android, Data was becoming extraordinarily adept at knowing when to shut up. Prudently ignoring Riker's glare, he moved on, commenting occasionally on points of interest along the way, especially low ones

"It is an Inn, sir." Data had found what he was looking for.

"I can see that, Data. But what is that smell?"

Data sniffed. "Fermented ale, a primitive concoction of fermented grain, yeast, bacteria and herbs. Also food, some of which is burned, or burning."

"Definitely a five star rating," drawled Riker, and motioned him forward before the inevitable query.

The Innkeeper was a portly man with bristly hair. He had one green eye and one brown... and both were fixed on the Enterprise duo in a none-too-friendly fashion.

As if on cue, Data swiftly produced a handful of bronze coins, which in turn instantly produced a toothy smile.

"And what might I do for you, young gentlemen?" he rumbled happily.

"A room for three nights, sir," Data replied. "And meals," he added as an afterthought.

"Certainly," the rather pungent Shael replied, and produced a

register.

For a moment Data stared intently at the paper pages and the stylus handed to him. Then he swiftly completed the formalities and led Riker to the stairs. On the landing he paused.

"Sir, that paper and the writing instrument were not produced on this planet."

"You're certain?"

"Yes, sir. The technology will not be available, even in its most rudimentary form, for another three hundred years - or shouldn't have been," Data added ominously.

"Then it's a lead. I wonder who he knows?" Riker mused, as they moved along an oppressively narrow corridor.

Data only just managed to control a strong urge to correct the Human's grammar. *It just isn't the right time*, he thought, identifying some particularly unpleasant parasitical insects scuttling under the door of their room.

"This one, sir," he said, making another prudent decision. Riker would discover the fleas soon enough.

The room was stark and bare. Two sleeping platforms hung by chains from the walls. The floors were wooden beams sealed with a kind of clay mix, and filthy from lack of attention. There was a three legged table, to which Data was drawn by the battered lamp set in its centre.

Two coarse blankets were provided with each bed. There were no pillows, no mattresses to be seen.

Riker sighed. He'd slept on worse. "I want to go back and talk to that Innkeeper again," he decided aloud.

"Yes, sir," Data replied. "Intriguing," he added, to no-one in particular as he fiddled with the mantle adjustment on the lamp.

"Another anomaly, Data?"

"No, sir. Just... interesting."

Riker smiled. "Let's go," he said.

The portly Shael proved anything but co-operative. At length, Riker manoeuvred a name out of him.

"Where shall we find this 'Ayelin?'" Data asked patiently.

"It is difficult to say..." Boren, the Innkeeper, replied diffidently.

"Excuse us a moment." Riker drew Data away. "We need a bribe. Offer him some more coins."

Data's head tilted thoughtfully. "If he knows the answer to our question, why does he not simply give it?"

"Avarice, Data. One of the great failings of mankind. Just remember: don't give him the coins before he gives us the

information."

"Yes sir," Data replied doubtfully.

He possibly produced more than the necessary number of coins, because Boren suddenly became the most co-operative being in the known galaxy, producing not only the whereabouts of 'Ayelin,' but also regaling them with rumours and stories about monsters, mysterious traders and strange goings on in the nearby hills. When he had finally exhausted his font of information Data handed over the coins.

Boren leaned close to the now very Human, aquiline face of the android.

"You're a big, strong, healthy pair of lads - I've some likely looking talent in the back room. Fine.."

"I think not," Riker interrupted, and caught Data by the back of his shirt.

"I think not," Data repeated, as he was pulled backward out of the Inn.

"Inquiry: '*likely looking talent*', sir?" Data asked outside.

"Somebody's gonna have to look at the language computer," Riker mumbled to himself, as Data tucked his shirt back in.

"Is the translation not correct then?"

"Correct? Yes. Over embellished - definitely."

"Then...?"

"He was offering you a woman, Data, for money."

"Ah. Prostitution," Data affirmed, and suddenly looked very pleased with himself.

Riker slid a sideways glance at him as they moved on.

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

"Boren believes me to be Human. Until now it did not seem possible."

Riker was suddenly aware of acute discomfort. He hadn't counted on any possibility of Data being caught up in the illusion.

"Well, let's just be thankful that it is," he replied shortly. "Now, how do we find this 'Ayelin' person?"

Riker gradually became aware of a sense of things 'not being quite right' as Data led him toward an altogether better area. The streets were cobbled and there were night lamps. The buildings were made of a kind of composite, plain but strong, and obviously much more comfortable. Data noted that all laundry lines were on the roofs of the buildings.

It was much quieter. Few people were on the street, and no

children at all. Experimentally, Riker said as much to a passer-by.

The old man smiled. "Yes," he said. "It's always so much quieter when the children are in school. You wait until sunset, when everyone comes home from the fields and the mine. It won't be quiet anymore. You'll see."

They watched him shuffle away.

"It doesn't make any sense, Data. Half the town is missing, apparently out working and being educated - and back there a whole sub-culture is living in appalling conditions, and with none of these benefits."

Data paused, as if correlating information. "Yes," he said finally, "the number of juveniles we passed on the streets, and number of adults, either on the streets, or in Boren's establishment, does indicate a serious demographic anomaly. However, it is not uncommon in primitive societies for settlements, indeed, cities, to be divided into the 'haves' and the 'have nots.'"

"I know that, but this feels different. This is a small settlement, only just a town. No - the division is too acute. With a mine and agriculture and the - " He stopped dead. "Data, we're missing the point here. Your briefing said nothing about mining. What kind of mine? And who owns it?"

"Indeed, sir. And why did I not also realise that?" Data looked positively alarmed.

Riker watched him push a now wayward forelock of auburn hair off his brow and smiled. "I wouldn't worry too much, my friend. You've had a lot on your mind lately."

"That is no excuse. Distraction is a Human failing, sir. I - " The real meaning of Riker's statement became clear. Data's eyes met the blue ones, and a moment of silent understanding passed between them.

"Ayelin's establishment is only two hundred metres further down that street." Data pointed to a fairly wide street with a flower seller on its corner. Riker touched the android lightly on the shoulder and they turned together.

The heavy wooden door opened at Riker's knock.

"Yes?" A young woman with golden hair and pale skin looked up at them.

Riker cleared his throat. "We'd like to talk to the Trader Ayelin, about business."

She stepped back and gestured with a slender hand, her pale blue eyes moving from Riker to Data.

The passageway was long and dark. Both officers assumed a subtly defensive posture, Riker's senses prickling with apprehension. Data followed behind the young woman, a contemplative expression on his new face.

Will Riker was not surprised that the Trader should be a

woman. He watched her rise to her full height, only a few centimetres short of his.

Ayelin's face was soft and feminine, full-lipped and large-eyed, but her shoulders were broad and her bare arms whip-cord hard. She might have been a professional Terran athlete in appearance, but Riker knew full well that, physically, Ayelin would be more than a match for him.

"Welcome, gentlemen," she said, in a pleasingly husky voice, a practised smile revealing beautifully even teeth. "How can I help you?"

"My name is Riker, and this is my friend, Data. We are also traders, and we've come a great distance in search of new products to buy and sell." The well rehearsed speech rolled easily off his tongue. "We are told that you might be the only person who can help us."

The Trader's turquoise eyes narrowed. "Who told you this?" she demanded harshly, letting her gaze slide to the young man who was Data.

"One of the conditions for providing the information was our silence," Data told her sedately. If Riker was surprised at the android's ability to fabricate, he did not show it.

"I must know!" Ayelin flashed at Riker.

"No," Riker replied unblinkingly. "Our word is our guarantee."

"Fool," she said softly, but Data heard her. Aloud she said: "You are men of integrity. I will listen to your request, but what you see and hear will go no further." It was a threat, not a warning.

Data's brow furrowed in puzzlement at the apparent contradiction and he turned to Riker.

The First Officer's eyes were as hard as diamonds as he inclined his head.

The Trader's stock was considerable. By the time Riker had enticed a reasonably complete description of her wares from her, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that somebody had changed Shalamar forever, and that any other answers he might want were all somehow tied up in the mine.

Data placed orders for two weapons, and several products that could not have been produced on Shalamar, and was about to advance a deposit when the girl, Rasa, returned, moving silently to her employer's side, a bowl of water and a cloth in hand.

Ayelin accepted the money from Data, handing it to Rasa, who then proceeded to wash the Trader's hands in a fastidious, ritualistic fashion, and dry them.

When the bowl had been removed, she looked up, straight at Riker, or at least, at Riker's left ear.

"You wear no spouse mark, Riker?"

For a split second his mind went blank, then the memory was there. Instinctively, he touched his ear.

"No. I was promised in my youth, but she died. So, I'm still searching for my perfect match," he said lightly, and smiled a smile calculated to melt the hardest heart.

"Rasa," Ayelin called, without turning. "Take Mr. Data out to the orchards. I wish to speak to Riker alone."

Mission accomplished, thought Riker wryly, and almost laughed at the expression on Data's face when Rasa slid her hand into his.

When they were gone Ayelin turned, her black hair shimmering like a raven's wing. Riker felt himself respond to the desire in her eyes, felt her caress, electric against his throat.

"You are very attractive, Riker," Ayelin whispered, allowing her fingertips to trail down inside his shirt. "Perhaps I am your perfect match?"

"Mmmm... " Riker leaned forward and kissed her throat, wondering even as his heart began to pound how he was going to work Topaline and the Ferengi into their love-making. There was a small tug and he found himself divested of his shirt. Ayelin, too, had released the shoulder clasp of her dress, and sat before him as creamy and perfect as an alabaster statue, surrounded by the filmy sea-green gown, lying as it had fallen.

"You are... beautiful," Riker whispered in a desire blurred voice, and reached out to lay a palm on her cheek, his fingers pushing back the silky strands of hair.

Beneath, he failed to notice a tiny red stone, fused into the skin of the ear lobe, never to be removed. A spouse mark. He drew his hand away, only to have it caught.

Ayelin brought the palm to her lips. Riker groaned.

It was too late. Far too late.

They walked down the street, hand in hand, a young man engrossed in the gentle ramblings of a golden haired girl.

Data was recording every detail of the township - and the conversation - but the essence that was Data was completely involved with the gold flecks that danced in her eyes, the way the warm sunshine drew colour into the pale cheeks; the firmness of the warm hand gripping his.

There was, indeed, an orchard. The giant trees grew in endless rows, heavy with red, pear shaped fruit.

They entered a grove where the lush, green canopies filtered the sunshine to a soft, dappled light and dead leaves crunched underfoot.

Data found himself enjoying the sound, and the sickly sweet smell of blossom. *Geordi would be interested in my leap forward in aesthetic appreciation.* He made a mental note to tell him so.

A bloom dislodged, showering pink petals on Data's hair. He picked one off, and studied it. In his mind's eye he could see the life and death struggle between the beautiful flying insect and the horned beetle inside one of the flowers. And the victory; the tearing apart of the fragile winged body, spilling fertile pollen grains from a torn throat pouch onto the waiting stamens.

"Data?"

He looked up and met Rasa's cornflower blue eyes. "Yes?"

"Have you ever rested beneath a pola tree? The leaves are deep and soft, and you can hear the sounds of life... "

"Oh?" Data's head tilted inquiringly

Rasa smiled and drew him close to the nearest tree.

"Listen," she said. Somewhere close they could hear a cicada-like trill, above them the constant clicking of insect wings, and at their feet, the rustle of tiny rodents beneath the leaves. A mouse-like head popped up and blinked at Data, took fright and dived back under again.

"And this makes you happy?"

"Oh yes. When I come here, it feels good to be alive!" Rasa laughed, did a pirouette and flopped on the leaves.

Data looked about in alarm for the little mice. Rasa laughed again.

"It's all right. They are very fast. Come, sit down."

He sat very gingerly on a pile of leaves. Rasa placed her hand in his again.

"Rasa, how old are you?" Data's thoughts echoed the past.

"Twenty-two revolutions," she replied frankly.

Eighteen Earth years, calculated Data.

"I am three revolutions past the legal age," Rasa told him shyly.

"Legal age... for what?" asked Data, even as the information came to him.

"The legal age to be given as a spouse, silly. Everyone knows that."

Data managed to look sheepish. "Of course," he improvised. "I was just... teasing."

"Then don't." Rasa's voice became earnest. "I have never met anyone I liked until now. You... you're so... gentle."

As if caught on the raw, Data rose in one incredible movement, realised what he'd done, blinked, and stood uncertainly, wondering how to explain himself.

Rasa got up. "I am sorry you are offended. I will go."

"No, Rasa!" He caught her hand as she started to leave. "You reminded me of... someone else. I am sorry to have startled you."

"Then perhaps you like me a little?" Rasa blinked away tears.

"Of course," Data said matter-of-factly, gazing at their linked hands with a bewildered kind of expression on his face.

Slowly, fluidly, Rasa's beautiful face lifted to his, lips parted, arms curling around his neck.

For a moment it seemed that Data was frozen. Then his head bent to hers.

As soon as he stepped into Holodeck 3, Jean-Luc Picard wished he'd stayed in bed for his off-duty.

Deanna Troi turned to him, shining eyed. "Captain, isn't it beautiful?" she breathed.

They were in a room filled with people making preparations for Christmas. They had chosen a New England setting, and despite its size, the room put one in mind of a log cabin.

An enormous tree was being trimmed at one end, and a roaring fire crackled in a stone fireplace at the other. Through the windows, snow could be seen falling.

Everywhere decorations were being made, or hung, representing almost every kind of Christmas tradition.

Deanna frowned, and turned again to Picard. "You are feeling isolated from all this... and you shouldn't," she told him. "It is as much for us as it is for the children."

The Captain scowled, and wished fervently that the Counselor also had stayed in bed.

"Counselor," he said, "how I do or not feel about Christmas is of no consequence to the efficient running of this vessel. Therefore, I suggest you go and join in the festivities. If you will excuse me." He inclined his head, turned on his heel, and left.

Deanna watched him go and sighed.

"Hey, Counselor!" yelled Geordi La Forge. "Come and help string this popcorn. You know what they say about idle hands... "

The Counselor cast another frustrated glance after the Captain, then gave herself up to the joy and happiness that filled the room.

The world came into focus very slowly. Riker's head throbbed. He was cold and stiff. Forcing himself into a sitting position was a small agony.

Only then did he fully realise that his shirt was gone. He was so angry that he swore in three languages, Klingon and Tellarite curses being the only ones disgusting enough for his mood.

He was in a windowless room, constructed of 24th century materials and sealed by a force shield.

Circulation returned slowly and Riker drew himself stiffly to his feet and began moving about to loosen up. Gradually the details of what happened came back to him. Being woken from a dead sleep and soundly beaten before he could even retaliate had blurred his memory somewhat.

The greatest puzzle lay in why he still lived, not garotted to death. He could still remember the big Shael's words clearly:

"You have defiled the spouse mark!"

And Ayelin, stone faced, drawing her hair back to reveal the ruby-red gem, as Riker struggled, gasping, to his feet for the last time. The king-hit that had caused the pain in his head and the stiffness in his neck was the last thing he could remember.

It was getting colder. Riker peered out into the corridor, but there was little to see. It did nothing for his temper.

Neither did the thought of explaining how he managed to get separated from his communicator. And that thought brought him back to Ayelin. Why had she hidden the spouse-mark? How much did she know? And, he realised suddenly, where the hell was Data?

Alone in the darkened room at the Inn, Data stood at the window watching the sun rise, a lonely silhouette.

Commander Riker had not returned, even though his message had stated that he would be back late that evening.

It had seemed logical at the time. He had little reason to doubt Rasa, and even less to suspect that the Commander was anything but perfectly safe.

Following what he believed were Riker's orders, Data had returned to the Inn early the previous evening to wait for him there.

He had made an error in judgement - several errors in judgement, in a crucial situation.

As he made his way down to the street and turned in the direction of Ayelin's house, Data hoped fervently that his friend would not have to bear the brunt of those mistakes.

The big wooden doors did not open to Data's insistent knocking. He applied the appropriate force..

There were signs of a scuffle in the living area. Will Riker's shirt lay crumpled on the floor. Data frowned slightly and retrieved it. There was a movement.

In a moment he was back across the room and into the hall, a slender wrist locked in his grasp. He looked down at Rasa, unmoved by her fear.

"Where is William Riker?" he demanded.

Rasa shook her head fearfully.

"You deceived me - twice. Why?"

"I do what I am told to do," she replied. "I do not know where Riker is, but Marek was here. Marek works at the mine."

"Who is Marek?" Data's face remained grim.

"The spouse of Ayelin. They have been apart for three revolutions."

Data dropped her hand. "Riker is alive?"

Rasa rubbed her wrist. "Marek did not kill him. It was very strange. They took him away soon after you left."

An almost desolate look passed across the android's face. "Where is the mine?" he said flatly.

"I will take you there," she said, but hesitated when Data looked sharply at her. "You were wrong. I only deceived you once," she told him gently, and turned.

"Come," she said.

Riker slept. His head was bowed on arms resting on his knees, a position only marginally warmer than exposing his body to the cold floor. It was, however, the sleep of the wary.

Footfalls brought him to his feet in seconds, the haze of sleep still momentarily in his eyes.

"Riker." A familiar voice challenged his memory.

"Kazago!" Riker exclaimed as the Ferengi stepped into view.

"Daimon Kazago," corrected the alien. "When I was told about the strangers I recognised your name immediately, Riker. You Humans are becoming too arrogant - as your failure demonstrates."

A little too close to the bone. Riker ignored the jibe.

"So you've found a more profitable venture than Bok's little game? Do you have any idea of the effect this operation will have on these people?" he finished angrily.

"We are not bound by your stupid laws. Besides, this planet is not even a Federation member yet!" retorted Kazago.

"These people are not ready for technology. You could destroy them with your interference!"

"Starfleet indoctrination, Riker. What I have given them is the technology to build - have you seen any weapons here not Shaellan?"

For a moment Riker was thrown. Every weapon displayed by Ayelin for Data had been indigenous.

"No," he said warily, "but if you continue to accelerate their development, they'll begin to produce their own. They already fight all the time. Think what they could do to one another just with flintlocks, or rifles - "

Kazago looked at him blankly.

"Early projectile weapons," Riker explained impatiently.

"Ah. But there is no profit in such weapons. They could not pay what it would cost to supply them, and I already have the mine."

"What you're doing is wrong, Kazago. You're taking advantage of a technologically immature race with no thought as to the consequences, now, or in the future!" Riker's voice rose, to no avail. Kazago turned to shuffle off, done with arguing, then paused.

"You have not asked why you were brought here."

"It seems obvious to me. Just protecting your investment?"

"Perhaps." The Ferengi seemed to smirk. "But you will also bring me the machine."

Kazago looked pleased at the momentary flicker of surprise Riker could not keep out of his eyes.

"Did you not think that I would have learned everything possible about such a valuable piece of merchandise, including its name?"

Riker's eyes widened in dismay.

"It is too powerful to be taken by force, but it will come for you. For your life it will submit itself to be dismantled, because that is its duty, as a Starfleet Officer," Kazago sneered.

Riker controlled his temper with the same tenacity that kept him from shivering in front of his captor.

"It won't work. Sooner or later he'd have to be reassembled. He'd escape in a minute!"

"Of course. But I am interested only in the sale of the technology - and the contents of its memory banks."

"No!" The word was jerked from the Human. "You can't. He'll die!"

"Die, Riker? A machine?"

"Data is more than just a machine. You will be killing him!" Riker said vehemently.

"I think not, Human," replied the Ferengi unaffectedly. A tray arrived. Kazago left without another word.

Riker watched as the force shield was raised a few centimetres and the tray slid beneath it.

Just water and a congealed mess that might once have been appetising. He started to shiver again as the adrenalin subsided.

Something inside him snapped. He lashed out with his right boot, launching the tray into the force field, where it was violently repulsed, spreading its greasy contents all over the cell.

It was supposed to be dramatic. It was supposed to make him feel better.

"Shit," he said.

After two hours of walking and climbing, they cleared the last ravine.

Rasa turned, expecting Data to be breathing hard, and was mildly startled to see a cool and fresh young man at her heels. A good servant, however, asks no questions.

"There." She pointed to a surprisingly innocuous looking building module.

"It is a processing plant. Where is the mine?"

"This is the mine," Rasa replied, nonplussed.

Data guessed that the Shael had no true concept of mining, Shaellan metallurgy still being reliant on surface and alluvial ores. He stood very still, listening intently.

"This way," he said, surprised.

Rasa jumped.

"There is nothing to fear," Data explained absently, wandering a little further on to get a better view of the rear of the building.

"Marek," whispered Rasa, as the big broad Shael emerged unexpectedly from the plant and let himself into a small detached room only metres away.

Data's head tilted, as if listening again.

"A hydraulic lift," he announced and started towards it, a bemused Rasa following behind.

The door of the outhouse had a voice activated security lock. For a moment Data looked beaten. Then, suddenly, he turned.

"The lift is returning," he announced.

"I hear nothing," Rasa protested.

"It does not matter. You must do as I say. If it is Marek, you must distract him so that I may gain entry to the building before the door closes."

Rasa nodded doubtfully, and watched as Data flattened himself against the wall around the corner nearest the door.

Marek showed little surprise at seeing Rasa, pausing to speak to her just metres from the slowly closing door.

It gave Data less than twenty five seconds to traverse four feet without being seen. It was as well that Rasa's view was also blocked, for the android slipped silently around the corner, then leaped, turning ninety degrees through the air, and passing through the remaining eighteen inches of doorway sideways.

Inside, the lift stood open. Data stepped in and to the side, pressing himself against it, and activating the touch pad control.

There was only one stop. All was silent. Carefully, he stepped out. Nothing. He concentrated all of his android senses.

No footfalls, no biological hot spots nearby.

He detected something else. The whole central area was filled with unsecured computer banks, which explained the unusually low ambient temperature. Data took very little time to discover their purpose - drone mining.

A loud crash nearby was instantly pinpointed by his directional sensor.

Beyond the mainframe computer area was an annexe consisting of three rooms, one obviously for storage, one empty, and one sealed by an active force shield.

Commander Riker was facing away from the door, staring at the indescribable mess which was dripping slowly down the walls.

"Sir?"

"Data!" Riker turned. "How did you... Data, you can't stay here! Can you get rid of the force shield?"

"No, sir. There is no disarming mechanism on the control panel. It must be situated elsewhere. A phaser blast might - "

"All right, all right," Riker interrupted urgently. "Listen to me. It *is* the Ferengi. Kazago is here, and he wants *you*. You have to get back to the ship. Now!" he ordered.

"Since Kazago is now undoubtedly aware that the Enterprise is here, sir, I suggest we break silence and request emergency beam out," Data replied, and did something to the force shield control panel.

It rose a few centimetres, and he pushed Riker's shirt beneath it. At the Human's nod, he tapped the third button on his own.

"Lt. Cmdr. Data to Enterprise."

"Enterprise here. What the devil is going on, Data?" Picard's voice boomed.

"Request emergency beam up, sir," Data replied, without equivocation. "Two, at these co-ordinates."

Nothing happened.

"Sir?" Riker spoke, fully clothed again.

"Number One, you are in a shielded area. The transporter beam cannot penetrate the building. Get the hell out of there, now!"

"Captain," interposed Data, "we have a problem."

"Yes, machine, you have a great problem."

"Who is that?!" Picard's voice barked.

"Kazago," supplied Data.

"Release my people, Kazago! What you are doing is illegal and immoral!!"

"The Federation has no agreement with, and therefore no jurisdiction on, this planet, Picard. The machine is now mine. It is on my property and it wears no uniform. If you take action against this operation, I will not be responsible for what will happen to the Human."

A silence followed. Riker could see, in his mind's eye, a worried Deanna Troi, reaffirming the truth of Kazago's intention.

"If anything happens to either of my officers, I will not be responsible for what happens to you or your operation," Picard shouted angrily.

"No more talk!" Kazago motioned to one of the subordinate Ferengi at his back. The gold button was ripped from Data's shirt and a weapon aimed at the android's head.

"Number One, what's happening?" the Captain demanded.

"We are unharmed, sir. Riker out." He pulled the button off and skipped it under the force shield.

The Ferengi studied it carefully before moving the blaster away from Data's head.

Ignoring Riker, Kazago turned to the android.

"Now, machine. You have two options: submit to being dismantled, in which case I will agree to return the Human to the Enterprise alive; or - refuse, in which case, you return to the ship - it would be too great a crime to destroy such valuable merchandise - and Riker will be handed to the Shaels... for execution."

"Data, I order you to refuse. Go back to the ship. Now!" said Riker vehemently.

The android looked blankly from one to the other. For long moments he remained silent. Kazago growled impatiently.

"Sir," Data faced Riker. "Would you not do just this for the Captain - or any member of the crew - in the same circumstances?"

"That's not fair." There was no real answer to that, and Riker would not lie to the android.

Data, however, had his answer. "I will do what I must, Commander," he said. "As much as I value my own life, I value yours more. It would not be an equitable trade, your way, sir."

"Data, don't do this!" Riker pleaded.

"I am sorry, sir. Please say goodbye to the others for me, and

tell Geordi I am sorry about the poker game. He will understand."

A smile flickered on Riker's lips and died.

"We go!" growled Kazago, and turned. Finally, Data broke eye contact, turned and followed.

A moment later they were gone. For a long time Riker stood frozen. Then, slowly, his face twisted in anguish and frustration and his fists lashed out at the force shield.

The shock lifted him off his feet, and dumped him on his backside, across the floor. Hunched over, and still smarting from the shock, Riker thrust his damaged hands under his armpits and let his chin fall disconsolately against his chest, jaw fiercely clenched.

The blue eyes grew very bright. Somewhere in the depths of his anger, Will Riker felt them fill for the first time since he was eight years old...

Jean-Luc Picard sat in his chair with all the coiled power of a hungry lion unable to pounce.

"Worf. Any progress in tracking those communicators?"

"No, sir. They are no longer active."

"Bioscan?"

"Commander Riker's life sign is indistinguishable."

"And Data?"

"We are trying, sir, but there is considerable interference from an underground power source."

"A power source that large on Shalamar? What are we dealing with here?" Picard rose out of his seat.

"My money's still on the Ferengi." Geordi La Forge stepped off the turbolift.

"Constructive comment, Mr. La Forge," the Captain said irritably.

"We've found a way to track that power source, although if it is the Ferengi, I'd hate to think what they're doing with that much power."

"Can you tell us the location of the power source or not, Lieutenant?" Picard snapped.

La Forge suddenly became aware of the circles under the Captain's eyes and the general tension on the bridge.

"Yes, sir. It should be down loaded into Worf's computer by now."

"I have it sir. Sensors are unable to penetrate the actual

site, but they do confirm Geordi's readings. Request permission to arm a landing party to - "

"As you were, Lieutenant! You seem to have forgotten something," Picard added, surprisingly gently.

"The Prime Directive," Worf hissed through his teeth.

"Indeed," sighed Picard. "In fact, I myself must lead this landing party, without phasers."

"NO!... sir." Picard's eyes widened and his nostrils flared. Worf continued, "Commander Riker would not have allowed you to be placed in such danger. With all respect, sir, we have lost two senior command officers. To risk the Captain's life at a time like this... "

Picard raised a hand. "Point taken, Mr. Worf." *And very nicely handled,* he thought wryly. *You are learning, my friend.* "However, I will be taking the team down, unless you can think of a suitable substitute." The hazel eyes moved from the striking features of the Klingon, to the visored La Forge, and the youth of Wesley Crusher. "See to the away team, Mr. Worf," he said quietly.

The Klingon's lips pressed into a disapproving line, but he nodded sombrely and strode off.

Picard watched the less than buoyant departure of his Chief Engineer with understanding.

"Mr. La Forge," he said softly. "Well done."

Geordi half turned, smiled self consciously and then disappeared into the turbo-lift.

"Sometimes I wonder what you need me for." Deanna Troi spoke for the first time, and managed to draw a gentle smile from the haggard features.

"Oh, I need you all right," he said quietly. "We're sitting here, blind as bats, not even certain that Data and Will are anywhere near that... installation!"

Deanna shuddered and Picard stopped venting his spleen and met her haunted eyes. "Counselor?"

Troi shook her head. Wordlessly, he patted the hand nearest his and forced optimism into both his feelings and his expression. A moment later he turned away.

"Mr. Crusher," he said crisply. "Find out why no-one has reported to take over Worf's station."

"Aye, sir," came the reply.

They assembled in the transporter room, each aware of Worf's towering presence.

Picard was immediately aware of the Security Chief's appraisal as he arrived. He was quite comfortable in the native costume, despite Worf's doubtful look, and moved on to inspect the four young

security officers.

The three men were all very nearly as tall as their chief, relaxed and confident in their ability to complete the mission. Lt. J.G. Kahla Horo, however, seemed restless and tense. Picard pondered Worf's choice, as the honey-skinned Horo prowled about Chief O'Brien's console.

"You have all been fully briefed by Lt. Worf, so I will be brief. This is a covert operation. Contact with the Shael's is to be avoided at all costs." His eyes lit on the metal knives and swords each carried. "Our mission is the retrieval of Commander Riker and Lt. Cmdr. Data. Any contact with the Ferengi is to be met with defensive tactics only. Prepare to beam down."

They spread out on the platform and assumed their positions.

O'Brien's gaze moved from Picard to the sullen Klingon standing silently alongside the console. Worf's jaw was clenched so hard that he had to stifle an instinctive urge to step back.

"Mr. Worf, you have the bridge in my absence. Look after my ship, Lieutenant," Picard entrusted, his eyes burning into the Klingon's.

Worf inclined his head infinitesimally.

"Energise," said Picard.

William Riker had once seen a colonist on Reba XIV suffer a massive heart attack. His re-creation of that event so alarmed the Ferengi guard that he scuttled off down the corridor at speed. The corpse almost smiled.

As soon as the field went down, Riker was on his feet and running in the direction Data had come from. He found himself surrounded by computers. He caught his breath, and moved carefully between banks. He paused again at the sound of the returning Ferengi, just long enough for him to pass. It was almost too easy. Riker had never had *much* faith in Ferengi intelligence, but they were certainly not stupid.

Beyond the mainframe area it became simpler. In one direction, a lift. In the other, a corridor leading to a single door. Riker chose the door.

His hands were swollen, ugly purple and black mottling already distinct under the skin. As he moved he heard his jailor coming back, took flight despite his injuries, and plunged through the doors as a phaser blast lanced past him into the wall.

Kazago was waiting, a blaster aimed squarely at the Human's head. The oncoming Ferengi halted, waited for a command from their leader.

Riker was no longer aware of them, no longer cared - for, laid out on a table, piece by piece, was the dismantled body of Lt. Cmdr. Data. Kazago allowed him to approach them, enjoying some perverse satisfaction in the Human's misery.

Silently, Will touched the arm he himself had once removed.

There was no life, no warmth, nothing but hardware. He knew a desire to kill Kazago, a blinding moment of bestial rage that almost consumed the gentle William Riker before he could stop it.

"Where... what have you done with his...?" Riker's anger drained away. "Is he dead?" he said flatly.

Kazago, however, was not about to let him off so easily. The two henchmen took him into custody, and the little Daimon shuffled over to leer up into his face.

"This has been a most profitable venture," Kazago gloated, and motioned to a third subordinate, apparently the computer expert in charge of the mining drones, according to the way Kazago addressed him.

Riker watched, helpless, as a portable storage unit was brought to the table and opened. The scientist reached for Data's lifeless head.

The sight of the Ferengi's fingers touching the android's pristine features was too much for the battered Human. Riker lunged free of his captors and tore it from the alien's grasp, only to be cut down by Kazago's blaster..

Picard turned to his team as the transporter effect died away.

A strong breeze lifted Horo's long black tresses and ruffled Whitney's curls.

"Captain?" the young man spoke up. "Lt. Worf requested that you allow one of us to take the point at all times... sir."

"Oh he did, did he?" The remnant of a smile tugged at the older man's lips. "Very well. After you, Lt. Whitney." Picard followed soberly, Kahla Horo making a formidable rear guard.

As they made their way covertly around the installation, Picard noticed that his people had moved into a 'T' formation, Ferris and Estevez now actually flanking him closely.

"Worf..." he said quietly to himself.

"Yes, Captain?" Ferris responded to the murmur.

"I said, take Lt. Horo and find out what that room is for," Picard improvised, gesturing toward the smaller building.

Again he was struck by Horo's cat-like grace, and her youth. The pair had circled the out-building and come together at the door. Ferris studied the controls while Horo stood sentry.

Kahla saw him first. Picard was aware of tension as she intercepted the big Shael only feet from the plant. Ferris slipped away. Several strained minutes passed before they parted, and the Shael called something to activate the door. Kahla watched him disappear into the processing plant before making her way back to Picard.

"His name is Marek, and he considers himself to be indispensable in the running of this place," she reported without

preamble.

"How did he get inside?" asked Picard.

"A voice activated mechanism. The same as the one on the small building. Ferris studied that one. He's watching the back now. Sir, the door is only a medium density alloy. It would only take seconds to phaser through it."

"Remember where you are, Lieutenant," Picard reminded her quietly.

"Yes, sir, but--"

"No buts, Lieutenant," said Picard, thinking how like Tasha she was. "I want to get them back, perhaps even more than you do, but our first duty is to the Prime Directive. Perhaps there is a less conspicuous way," he finished thoughtfully, and drew back behind the rocks.

"Picard to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Worf here."

Kahla did not hear the rest of the conversation, but followed silently with the others when Picard motioned them all down the slope.

"All of you, act naturally. Whitney, Estevez, block the doorway. Horo, converse with them until I tell you otherwise," Picard said, over the sound of the machinery in the processing plant.

Surreptitiously, he activated his communicator. "All clear, Mr. Ferris?" he checked.

"Yes, sir," came the low-voiced reply.

"Mr. Worf. Energise."

Kahla Horo's head snapped around from its observation of the factory exit, in time to see the offending doors dematerialise in safe, secure silence.

"Quickly!" Picard's voice was suddenly full of urgency. He found himself behind a wall of bodies as the lift descended moments later, wondering impatiently just who was really in charge.

They arrived unheralded, the security guards fanning out quickly to check both directions.

Picard moved to draw his sword, only to be halted, hand on hilt, by the sound of phaser fire behind the closed door directly ahead.

Worf's people reacted like quicksilver, all there, pressed against the walls as their presence activated the door. Picard could hear the steady rhythm of Whitney's breathing over the staccato of his own heartbeat as they stood side by side.

Ferris led the flying wedge, Picard once again surrounded, into the room. Milliseconds later Horo was sitting on a Ferengi, his own blaster pointed at his nose, and Estevez seemed to relish bailing

another up with one of their electro-plasmic whips.

Ferris, the first in, had taken a phaser stun before Whitney had effectively disarmed Kazago.

Picard moved his steel weapon, now at the throat of the computer scientist.

"Get over there with your Daimon," he growled, shoving the Ferengi toward Whitney, and going straight to Riker's side.

He touched the big man's throat, his thoughts frozen. There was a pulse. Picard exhaled, and closed his eyes for a moment, then came back to life, checking Ferris and rising slowly as the adrenalin subsided. It jumped again as his mind finally focused on the table.

"Damn!" he said thickly.

"Enterprise, have sickbay... Have sickbay standing by. Also, ask Lt. La Forge and Chief O'Brien to prepare for extensive repairs... on Data. Picard out."

William Riker stood brooding in the corner of the science lab as a drawn and silent Geordi La Forge assisted Beverly Crusher in the final check of the reassembled Data. He moved his pinkened hands to his sides, ignoring the healing tingle of them, and Crusher's reassuring glance.

It had been confirmed that the Ferengi had not completed their work on Data, but no-one could say what damage might have been done, through ignorance or haste.

"We're ready," Geordi said, in a voice only a whisper of its former self.

Riker came to the bedside. A sombre Chief O'Brien moved to the monitors. Crusher nodded. Almost reluctantly, La Forge reached behind the android and activated the switch.

Riker leaned forward as the yellow eyes sprang open, and waited.

Data did not immediately sit up. Instead his gaze moved slowly from Crusher to Geordi, and O'Brien beyond, with seemingly little reaction. He did not move his head, which had been turned to the left for easier access during Crusher's examination.

It was almost as if he did not want to wake up.

"Data?" Geordi said impatiently. "You're safe! Are you all right?" Crusher showed surprise at the note of pleading in the Engineer's voice.

"I am functioning satisfactorily," Data said flatly, still unmoved.

Riker's look of apprehension turned to one of understanding and affection.

"Data," he said softly. "We both made it."

The android's head snapped around, and even as the yellow eyes lighted on Riker's face, he was rising in one smooth movement, to a sitting position.

"You are alive," Data said unnecessarily.

Riker grinned. "We both are, my friend. Welcome back."

Jean-Luc Picard turned away from his personal communications console, less than satisfied with Starfleet's solution to the problem of Shalamar.

The Ferengi would be extradited to a mutually-agreed freeport and the mining operation closed down, in itself an arbitrary decision, in Picard's view. His mind went back over the details of Riker's report. The changes to Shalamar society, the possible consequences of pulling their newly found prosperity out from under them, did not bear thinking about - only now Starfleet *would* have to think about them. It would soon find that a team of sociologists would not even begin to be able to address the Shaelian problem.

Only the fact that such a relatively small population had been directly contaminated, and that there was such a chasm between their own development and the technology introduced by the Ferengi, saved the situation from being a total disaster.

Mopping up had already begun. Chief O'Brien and several of his subordinates had been using sensors to comb the planet for any material not indigenous to Shalamar, and removing it surreptitiously with the transporters.

Picard ran a hand over his face. None of this altered the fact that the damage had been done, and that the Enterprise had done little more than make the Shael's lives, at least in the short term, temporarily worse.

The Captain made his way unsmilingly to the holodeck. Despite the good news about Data, he did not feel the same high spirits as the rest of the crew.

Deanna Troi was waiting by the turbo-lift.

"Counselor." His greeting was less than convivial. "You are no doubt going to lecture me on the limitations of a Starship Cap- "

"On the contrary, Captain," Deanna smiled, "I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas." She linked her arm with his for the short walk to the holodeck.

"You see," he said gruffly, "I do need you." The doors of the holodeck opened and the sounds, smells and colours of Christmas filled the air. Data was there, listening to Geordi hold forth on the delights of eggnog over hot toddies; Will Riker was, for one rare occasion, out of uniform, in an enormous Aran knit sweater over dark pants. He acknowledged the Captain. His face lit up, however, for Deanna, who parted gracefully from Picard.

Picard watched the First Officer put down a generous plate of Christmas fare and steer the Counselor somewhere beyond the crowds of crew people and their families.

He sighed heavily as the tension began to drain away.

"I do not understand their customs either."

Picard jumped visibly at the unexpected rumble of Worf's voice. Then he turned and looked up at the face of the friend who had so carefully, and so thoroughly, ensured his survival on Shalamar.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Worf," he said.



A LITTLE ROMANCE

by

Lori Scott

"Bridge to Captain Picard," Ensign Lou's voice came over the intercom.

"Picard here. What is it, Ensign?" Picard answered from his cabin. It was the middle of his sleep period.

"Sir, we are being hailed by the Public Relations Office at Darvan Station."

"The Head of the *Public Relations* Office?" Picard asked doubtfully.

"Yes, sir. She says it's very urgent."

"Patch it through to the screen in my quarters, Ensign."

He sighed. Public Relations. He just hoped that none of his crew members had caused any trouble while they were on shore leave. Picard pulled the top of his uniform over his head scant seconds before the computer screen in his quarters lit up.

"Ah, yes, Counselor Marshak. What can I do for you?"

"Captain, I'm sorry to bother you. I hope I didn't catch you at an inopportune moment, but I have a slight problem regarding members of your crew. There is a Ms. Harcourt in my outer office. She's looking for two of your crew, and she's very..." Marshak cleared her throat. "Insistent. For lack of a better word."

"Have they done anything wrong, Counselor?" Picard asked. As always his first thought was concern for his people.

"I don't think so." Marshak sighed deeply as she shook her head. "Look, Jean-Luc, I've got a problem down here. As far as I can figure it out your people didn't do anything wrong, but Ms. Harcourt won't tell me why she wants to see them. Normally I would just ignore something this trivial. I'm sure you have better things to do, and frankly, so do I. But Ms. Harcourt is... well... a trouble-maker and unfortunately she's a trouble-maker with a *lot* of influence."

"What kind of influence?" the Captain asked doubtfully.

"You ever heard of Harcourt Fenton Mudd? Course you have. Everybody has heard of him. Well - Ms. Harcourt is his grand-daughter and his only surviving relative. She owns about half the planet. In a month I'm being transferred back to the Academy on Earth, and all I want is to get through the next few weeks without killing her! So if you could just let her see the members of your crew that she's looking for I would consider it a great personal favour."

She looked so desperate that Captain Picard just didn't have

the heart to refuse. "All right, Linda," he said between chuckles. "Just give me their names and I will have them beam down to your office. Consider it a payback for that time you helped me sneak back into the Academy barracks when I stayed out past curfew."

"It's a deal. Only they can't beam down here. She wants to come aboard the Enterprise."

"What!" He wasn't laughing now. "You want me to bring this woman aboard my ship?"

"Welllllllll... yes. You see, she doesn't know their names. All she knows is that they were from the Enterprise. Sooooo... if she's going to find them, she has to come aboard to look for them."

"Linda, I don't care if we did go to the Academy together. This is ridiculous! I'm running a starship here, not a lost and found office!"

"Devin, I'm trying to work."

"Come on, Doc. You're not even giving me a chance."

Beverly Crusher looked up from the medical reports she had been studying to the man standing on the other side of her desk. *Not even a man, really*, she thought. *He's hardly more than an over-grown boy.*

He was, however, a very attractive boy. Devin Yartek was approximately 6' 4" tall, and he fairly loomed over her desk. At first glance he appeared Human, but look closer and an alien quality could be clearly seen in his appearance. Devin, in fact, was a Human/Orion hybrid. Like most members of his race he had vivid blue eyes, but he had inherited his Human mother's sandy brown hair. Although his skin was white it had just enough green tint in it that one might have thought he was Vulcan, but due to the smile that always seemed about ready to break free, few people made that mistake. The small smattering of freckles along the bridge of his nose only added to his boyish charm. He was, Beverly considered, quite simply beautiful.

She shook her head slowly from side to side. "Devin, I'm forty one years old. I am old enough to be your mother."

"Or old enough to be my - "

"Now, Devin!" A warning was clear in her tone of voice, but he either didn't notice or didn't care.

"Beverly, so what if you're thirteen years older than me? Who cares? When I'm forty seven you'll only be sixty, and when I'm sixty seven you'll only be eighty! Give me a chance... or are you already involved with someone else?" he asked.

Beverly instantly thought of Captain Picard. Was she involved?

"No... Well, yes... Not exactly. At least it isn't serious. Yet."

"Well, then," he said in a very serious tone, "that gives me an open opportunity, now doesn't it?"

"We've barely known each other a week."

"So give yourself a chance to get to know me better. Have dinner with me. I make a mean Cartarian Roast."

"NOOOOO!" But she was laughing now. He could be so damned charming. And that smile...

"You're breaking my heart, Doc. Really. If you don't say you'll come to dinner with me I'll have to check into Sickbay for treatment for my poor bruised heart."

"The only thing bruised around here is your oversized ego! Now either get out of here so I can finish my report, or go tell Captain Picard why my report is going to be late."

"OOOOOOEEEEEEEEHHHHHHHHH." He grimaced and feigned a shudder. "Okay, okay. I'm going." He walked dejectedly out the door of her office, but just as Beverly sighed in relief he stuck his head back through the door. "You're wrong, though, ya know."

"About what?"

"About the first time we met. It was five years ago. You were sitting in a park on Centaurus. You'd pulled your hair back into a ponytail and tied it with a black ribbon. Your face was clean and glowing, without an ounce of makeup on it. You were wearing a baggy grey sweatshirt over a pair of tight black pants. Your feet were bare. You laughed as you watched your son and one of his friends trying to put together a box kite. You looked all of about eighteen years old." He smiled at her sweetly. She was speechless and he knew it. "I'll see you at dinner, Beverly Anne."

"I'm not coming!" she yelled, but he had already disappeared. Determined to finish the report, she went back to work.

Riker stood before the transporter and watched the form shimmering into view. He had absolutely no idea what was going to materialise there. Just as he had stepped out of his sonic shower, Captain Picard had called his cabin. He'd been surprised since it was still the middle of the Captain's sleep period, but what had really shocked him was the way that he had practically barked his orders. It wasn't like Jean Luc Picard to be so terse.

William Riker had not made First Officer of a Galaxy Class Starship by being stupid, and he decided that it would be the better part of discretion not to ask the Captain what his problem was. He had merely reported to transporter room six as ordered, and waited for whatever or whoever was about to arrive to tell him what he was needed for. When he realised that it was a person forming on the transporter platform, his manners kicked in.

"Welcome aboard the Enterprise. I'm Commander William Ri... " Then they kicked out. A woman was standing on the transporter - but not just any woman. She was the most beautiful creature Riker had ever seen, and he'd seen quite a few in his time. At the Academy, Will Riker's proficiency with the ladies had earned him the nickname "James T. Junior". In Riker's view all people in the universe were endowed in different ways. But there was endowed and then there was ENDOWED! The only word he could think of to describe Maria Harcourt - the only *decent* word - was buxom.

When he had regained his composure enough to find out what exactly it was that Ms. Harcourt wanted and to get a list of all the crew who had taken shore leave in Darvan, they headed down to engineering to begin their search. All the way there, one thought kept going back and forth through Riker's mind.

If Deanna Troi sees me with this woman, I'm a Dead Man.

After they had checked out all of the crewmen in Security and Engineering, Riker decided that he had had just about more of Ms. Harcourt's company than he could take. If he thought he'd be able to get away with it he would have shoved her out the next airlock they came to. Beautiful or not, she was damned obnoxious!

With as much patience as he could muster, he asked her *again*, "Ms. Harcourt... Maria... don't you think it's about time you gave me some idea of who exactly it is we're looking for?" He gave her his most winning smile.

"Why, whatever do you mean, *Commander*?" She had a tone of voice that suggested she was used to getting whatever she wanted and didn't like being asked impertinent questions by someone she considered her inferior. Riker's smile got a little tighter.

"Well, it would help if you would tell me whether we are looking for two men, or two women, or one woman and one man. I don't even know what species we're looking for." His words and tone were polite but not friendly.

"Oh, very well," she answered in a voice of gracious snobbery. "One man and one woman. However, I insist that we find the woman first."

"May I ask why?"

"No-you-may-not!" With those words she gave him her back and walked away down the corridor. Riker raised his hand as if he would like to hit her, then he let it come to rest on his forehead, which was suddenly giving him great pain.

"I am going to kill that woman if we don't find them soon!" he announced to no-one in particular, and then stomped down the corridor after her.

Beverly Crusher sat in a booth in Ten Forward. She'd been nursing the same glass of synthehol for the last fifteen minutes. The report *had* been late, and she had not had a reasonable excuse to give Captain Picard. Luckily for her, Picard had been too distracted to notice that she was late. Somehow, though, it had irked her pride that he hadn't noticed. He had been deliberately *not* noticing her for the last few weeks and it was starting to annoy her. She had no way of knowing that the Captain had spent the last two hours listening to complaints from his crew in general regarding one Ms. Maria Harcourt. She was still staring into the swirling colours of the synthehol in her glass, so she didn't see Maria Harcourt walk up to her table.

"Dr. Beverly Anne Crusher?"

"Yes." She looked up at the person who was intruding upon her melancholy state, but she was still too absorbed in her own thoughts to pay any real attention to Maria's unusually endowed appearance.

"Good. Now, you listen to me, *Dr. Crusher*. Devin Yartek belongs to me, so keep away from him!"

Beverly was confused. She started to speak in response to Maria's outburst, but was cut off.

"Who - ?"

"I'm Maria Harcourt."

She tried again. "Who - "

"Oh, don't even bother trying to play the innocent with me, sweetie." Her voice absolutely dripped sarcasm. "I saw the two of you together on Darvan. I have eyes; I saw the way you were hanging all over him. Well, you can just forget it! I bought half the bloody planet to get him, so don't think that just because he's transferring to the Enterprise that you can go chasing after him. He's *mine*, and if you think or act otherwise, I can ruin your career in a minute." With that, Maria Harcourt turned, and, grabbing Commander Riker by the arm, walked haughtily out of Ten Forward. She left behind her a very stunned Beverly Crusher.

Guinan came over to Beverly's table and sat down. "Well, Beverly, have you been holding out on me? I thought you were interested in our beloved Captain."

Beverly looked at Guinan. "I have just been ordered to stop chasing a man that I don't even want by some little brat in a see-through dress. No - make that *commanded* to get away from him. And all because Ms. Maria Harcourt, the sovereign ruler of the Galaxy, saw him first." Beverly had no interest in Devin, but the more she thought about the little \$*@&&@\$! who had just threatened her, the angrier she got.

"So," Guinan asked, "are you going to do something about it?"

"DAMN STRAIGHT I AM!" She slammed her glass down on the table, spilling some of her drink, and pounded out of the room so quickly that she didn't even hear Guinan whistle and say -

"I wouldn't want to be Ms. Harcourt about now."

Riker hadn't spoken a single word since the fiasco in Ten Forward. He was completely struck dumb. He just kept silently thanking whatever forces ran the Galaxy that it was he and not Captain Picard who was escorting Ms. Harcourt. He didn't even want to think about what would have happened if Jean Luc Picard had been there when Maria insulted and threatened Beverly Crusher.

Maria's steps never wavered. She walked straight to sickbay and he realised that she must have known that Devin was there all the time; she had merely wanted to find and confront Dr. Crusher first.

They walked into the outer sickbay to find Devin treating a patient. It was a small girl who couldn't have been more than seven

years old, and who had scraped her knees. As he finished spraying them with antiseptic he gave the little girl a lollipop, tousled her brown curls and sent her back to class. Still smiling, he turned to see who needed his attention now. When he saw Maria the smile instantly vanished.

"MARIA! What are you doing here?"

"Cut the act, Devin. You can just forget about any plans you might have had with that stupid red-head. I've already warned her off."

"Warned her off? Plans? Maria, what are you... *Red-head!* What did you say to Beverly?"

"What do you think I said to that little tr - "

"Oh, Devin... " The voice that wafted into the room was sultry, seductive. All three of the room's occupants turned to see Beverly Crusher leaning against the door. "Hello, baby." She spoke slowly and sweetly. "Ms. Harcourt, I'm afraid you left before I could tell you my good news. You see... Devy and I are going to be married. Isn't that right, Angel?"

Catching on to Beverly's plot he walked over and slipped his arm around her waist. She smiled up at him adoringly, as if there was nobody else in the room."

"WHAT!!!" Maria shrieked.

"Oh, well, we hadn't originally planned on getting married, but what with the baby and all, we thought we might as well." Beverly seemed not at all concerned by Maria's reddening face.

"A *BABY*!!!"

"A little boy. We're going to call him Devin Junior." But before Beverly had finished her sentence Maria had run out of sickbay. In moments they were all laughing hysterically. The laughter stopped abruptly, however, when they heard -

"A baby?"

It was Captain Picard. He had heard everything. Devin took one look at Picard's face and promptly let Beverly go. Riker looked at Picard and decided that maybe there was something to be said for Ms. Harcourt's company after all. He left as quietly as he could.

"Now, Jean-Luc, I can explain!"

Beverly Crusher walked into her office and sat down behind her desk.

It was the first chance she'd had to sit down all day because of all the children she'd been treating. The Enterprise had recently been hit with an attack of the child's illness that had jokingly been named "The Mother's Nightmare". It wasn't life-threatening, but there wasn't a treatment that would get rid of it, and it was highly contagious. TMN lasted about five days, caused severe itching and insomnia. The children were absolutely miserable when they got it, and consequently their parents were miserable

too. Hence the name. Who wanted to have a four-year-old who was going to be up for five days straight? Luckily Wesley had already had TMN when he was seven, so she didn't have to worry about him getting it.

Treating children had never been Beverly's specialty and she made a silent promise to put a good word or two in Devin Yartek's record. He'd been a real life saver. The kids were all tired, cranky and generally unco-operative, but they loved Devin. His charms seemed to work as well on kids as on adults, and he'd worked an extra shift to help out.

Beverly was also grateful that Devin had finally lost interest in getting her to go out with him. (Had she known, the truth was that he hadn't lost interest; he had merely changed his tactics. When Devin saw that the direct approach wasn't going to work on his boss he decided to try a different way of winning her approval. He'd dazzle her with his skills as a doctor! Unfortunately for him, Beverly had put his long hours and extra hard work down to the enthusiasm of someone working a new job. He was going to have to think of some other way to get her attention.)

Thinking of Devin inevitably brought Beverly's mind back to the scenes that had taken place in her sickbay; could it really be last week? It seemed like yesterday. The whole incident had been an absolute disaster, and more than just a little bit confusing. Why *had* she turned Devin down when he asked her out? He was attractive, charming, they got along well, and he was always making her laugh... so what was the problem? She'd told Devin that he was too young for her, but that just didn't wash. These days, age was no longer the barrier to a relationship that it used to be. Just two months previously one of Beverly's old friends from Alveda had married a woman who was over twice his age and no-one gave it a second thought.

No. There had to be another reason why she kept turning Devin down. She leaned forward and rested her arms on the desk with her chin on her hands.

"What's wrong, Boss? You look like something a lematya dragged in."

"Thanks. You do wonders for my confidence. How are the others getting along?" She looked up at Devin and wondered if she looked as tired as he did.

He sat with his hip on the edge of her desk. "They're jes' peachy. There's only four kiddies left in sickbay right now, so we're almost done."

"Hardly *done*. Everybody should take this as an opportunity to get some rest before the next batch comes in. As contagious as The Mother's Nightmare is, every child on the ship'll probably come down with it before this is finished."

"Ya, that's what we figured too. Jones and Mereta are the only ones still on duty - everyone else went to catch some shuteye." He paused for a moment. "Everyone, that is, except for one doctor. She has been on duty for almost twenty two hours but refuses to get any sleep. We've tried the friendly approach to get her to rest, but she won't listen. Real dedicated, but real stubborn too. Terrible combination to have to work with." He was smiling mischievously but Beverly didn't notice. This was a nonemergency

situation. The last thing she wanted was for one of her doctors to collapse from exhaustion or take medication to stay conscious when it wasn't necessary.

"Who is it? Dr. Mogen? I'll order her off duty."

"Dr. Beverly Anne Crusher." His voice was monotone, his face absolutely expressionless, and it was a good thing too. If he'd laughed she might have hit him.

"Rebuke duly noted, Chief Medical Officer Yartek. You're awfully bossy for someone who has only been on board a couple of weeks."

"I know, but I come by it honestly. Me mother was a real straight-forward type. Hounded me poor Da for months until he agreed to marry her. She gave him merry hell for fifty years and they were one of the happiest married couples I ever saw."

"All right, Devin. I'll get some sleep if you will."

"That sounds suspiciously like an invitation." He spoke so quietly that Beverly wasn't sure she hadn't imagined it, and so she said nothing.

After checking with Jones and Mereta she headed for her cabin. It wasn't until she was lying on her bed that she realised just how tired she really was, but sleep eluded her. Try as she might, she simply couldn't stop thinking about what had happened the previous week. She had already crossed out age as the reason why she wouldn't go out with Devin. The next most obvious was Jack, but she eliminated that one too. Jack's death was a long time ago. She still loved him, but she had no intention of spending the rest of her life in mourning.

Maybe I should talk to Deanna about this, she thought. Then she remembered what had happened between Deanna and Debananni Rahl. No, she wasn't about to go to Deanna for advice on her love life. If anything, she'd talk to Guinan. *But I should be able to handle this on my own*, she thought. Then of course there was Wesley, but that excuse was as bad as the others. Wesley was an Acting-Ensign, seventeen years old, more than old enough to deal with his mother seeing other men. Oh, he would probably hate it, but he would just have to deal with it. All through her musings a little voice kept pestering Beverly until she just couldn't ignore it any more.

Its message was very simple. You didn't go out with Devin because he's not the one you're interested in, Stupid.

Jean-Luc, she thought. *What a ridiculous mess.*

If she'd thought he'd been ignoring her before the incident with Ms. Harcourt, that was nothing compared to the lengths he had gone to to avoid her since that scene in sickbay. And she now realised that she had just as studiously avoided the bridge and anywhere else she might run into the Captain.

I've been acting like a love-sick schoolgirl, she thought. Beverly had always gone after her desires with determination and conviction, but lately she'd been showing a remarkable lack of both. She knew that if Jack were here he'd tell her to quit wasting time

and go after what she wanted. He would have found the entire situation enormously funny, and knowing this did nothing to improve Beverly's disposition. She was disgusted with herself and Jean-Luc.

The way Beverly saw it now, there were three basic questions that had to be answered; 1) did she want to have a relationship with Captain Picard, 2) did he want to be involved with her, and 3) what was she going to do about it?

The answer to the first question was, obviously, yes. The answer to the second was a bit harder, but for the sake of her sanity she decided just to assume that it was yes. There was certainly enough evidence to indicate that he had some feelings for her; it would have to be enough. The last question was the hardest to answer. It was clear from Jean-Luc's behaviour the last few weeks that he wasn't going to make the first move, so Beverly would simply have to take the initiative herself.

The problem was how to go about it. For a fleeting instant Beverly wondered if she should pretend to be intoxicated with that disease they had all suffered from right after she joined the Enterprise, but that was but a moment's fancy. She need not have worried though, for even as she drifted off to sleep an idea was taking root in her mind.

How ironic that the idea came from, of all people, Devin.

"Come," Captain Picard answered the signal to his ready room. It was the last thing he would say for several long seconds. He wouldn't have been much more surprised if the Chief of Staff himself had walked through the door. And the Chief of Staff certainly couldn't have upset his equilibrium any more than his current visitor.

"Hello, Captain."

How long had it been since he'd heard that voice in person? He cleared his throat, trying desperately to regain the balance he'd lost the minute she walked into view.

"Dr. Crusher. Is there something I can do for you?" *Isn't she supposed to be on shore leave with Wesley?* he thought.

"Actually, yes, there is. I have a small problem concerning a member of the crew." She paused as if she was determining how to tell him about it. She seemed, to Picard, very reluctant. His first thought was that Devin Yartek had been harassing her again. The Captain had heard from several sources that the young Doctor was interested in having more than just a casual relationship with his CMO. *Then again, he thought, Beverly probably doesn't consider Mr. Yartek's attentions a harassment.* Picard flatly refused to acknowledge the feeling that had settled in his stomach, but it wasn't something that boded well for Yartek's future aboard the Enterprise.

"You see," Beverly continued, "the problem is somewhat medical in nature."

For a horrible moment Picard feared that she was about to tell him that she really was pregnant with Yartek's child and that the scene in sickbay hadn't really been a joke after all. "Medical,

Doctor? Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Not really serious yet, but it could become so if it's not dealt with. A member of the crew has been skipping his shore leaves. He missed the last two, and I learned that he doesn't intend to take his required R & R time this shore leave interval either. Oh, his performance on duty is still well within the required parameters for Starfleet. However, if you compare his status now with his own past record, he is showing a marked reduction in over all performance. I feel that it would be best if we deal with this now rather than waiting for it to become a real problem.

"I could order him to take shore leave myself, but I felt it would have more impact coming from you."

"Yes, that is a problem. Give me his name and I will personally see to it that he takes shore leave."

Beverly placed a small scrap of real paper on his desk and then walked over to the ready room door. She stopped, however, when he called to her.

"Doctor, this is the name of a restaurant on Elsia III."

"Yes, I know. Meet me there tonight at 1800 hours. I've already made the reservations." She smiled at him gently.

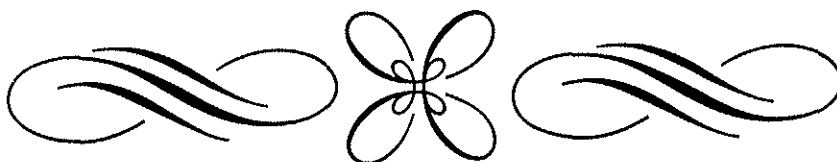
"Dr. Crusher, I am not going on shore leave."

Now the smile was out of control. In a sweet voice he hardly recognised, she said, "You are now." With that she left.

The Captain had finally managed to stop laughing when William Riker walked into his ready room. He still couldn't get over the way Beverly had manipulated him into going to dinner with her. Not that he minded; in fact, he was looking forward to the date a great deal.

"Ah, yes, Commander Riker. Just the man I wanted to see. I will be taking shore leave on Elsia III for the next five days. You have the con for now. I leave the choice of your off duty hours to your own discretion."

He walked to the transporter room where Beverly was waiting for him. Devin Yartek was the farthest thing from both of their minds.



MASQUERADE

by

Jackie Marshall

"There it lies. Tyrus Chal. And a more wretched den of reprobates would be harder to find in the whole of Akoru."

Darim Falinda's crimson cloak billowed round his lithe frame as his mount sidled restlessly under him, the sharp hooves jetting sand into the sun-baked air. He turned in the saddle, a mocking smile twisting his lips as he added,

"Yet it is the jewel of cities, as brazen and intoxicating as the best of whores." The look that lingered on Lieutenant Tasha Yar as she sat astride a grey gelding, clearly controlling him with considerably more efficiency than had been anticipated, stopped just short of out-right insult.

His insinuations were not lost on Tasha, who was all too aware that the ladies of Chal Province were not given to riding astride in the company of men but she had been adamant about not travelling cooped up in a stuffy palanquin. It wasn't merely a question of discomfort. Her job was to protect the Captain, and in order to do that she needed to be close by him. She bit down on the ready retort that rose to her lips and contented herself with a slight scowl.

It is unfortunate for Yar that just about every aspect of this mission seems to be setting her at a disadvantage, Captain Jean-Luc Picard reflected. Female emancipation was virtually unheard of in this particular province of Akoru and Yar obviously felt uncomfortable in the local clothing she'd had to adopt for the occasion. The full silken and gauze trousers, soft leather slippers and tight tunic top of richly embroidered red satin fitted ill with her far from frivolous nature. And their host's perverse attempts at flirtation merely added insult to injury. Aware of the difficulty she sometimes experienced in controlling her instinctive responses, Picard could only admire Tasha for her dogged determination not to be drawn.

His own attire was quite as exotic as Tasha's, although there was rather less of it. He was clad only in a pair of loose, baggy trousers and cummerbund, their shade of blue almost an exact match for the glittering ocean laid out below them. He, Tasha and Falinda had ridden ahead of the slow-moving company of palanquins and baggage mules to the top of a ridge chiselled out of hard-packed sand, a vantage point which gave them a bird's eye view of their destination. A slight breeze had met them as they scaled the ridge, a welcome change from the arid expanse of the Harabi desert, and the salty tang spoke evocatively of cool water and shade. They fell silent, each gazing down at Tyrus Chal while their horses fretted impatiently, side-stepping and twitching long tails in an effort to ward off the clouds of flies that filled the scorched air around them.

Tyrus Chal looked as if it had risen out of the depths of the

sea itself. Grey stone walls mounted upwards from the rocky promontory on which it was situated, jutting into the sea like an aggressive fist. The vivid blue waves of the ocean lapped tamely around the tall grey bastions, although it wasn't hard to visualise them tearing at the stone in blind fury during one of the frequent sudden storms that tore across the Dardan Peninsula. But Tyrus Chal had weathered a great number of storms in her chequered past, not all of them connected with the weather. That the city had somehow managed to emerge triumphant from each encounter, her people clinging as fiercely to their independence as the city herself clung to the rock, was largely a tribute to the power and tenacity of the ruling ducal family.

Tasha stared down at the city, narrowing her eyes against the glare reflected from the shimmering expanse of sea.

"And Deanna is somewhere in the middle of that," she said.

Captain's Log Stardate 41471.8:

Following instructions to transport an ambassador from Akoru, a planet wishing to apply for Federation membership, members of the Enterprise crew were invited to attend a state banquet given in our honour. This pleasant interlude came to an abrupt end when it was discovered that our Ship's Counselor, Deanna Troi, had been kidnapped some time shortly after the festivities had begun.

We have finally received word that she has been taken to Tyrus Chal, the remote and inaccessible stronghold of Duke Haldan Varl. Inaccessible, that is, to our transporters. The rock from which the city is largely constructed contains a natural shielding rendering our technology impotent. Not only must our attempts to regain our Counselor therefore be conducted personally, but the situation is of a delicate nature which will require a certain amount of tact and skill if it is to be resolved satisfactorily.

Akoru's present stage of development has some parallels to that of Earth at the end of the twentieth century, but Tyrus Chal and its surrounding province are an anachronism, maintaining a position of considerable power outside the mainstream of Akorun society. Tyrus Chal is archaic, adhering strictly to the mores and traditions of Akoru's past, which would appear to resemble feudal societies of Earth's history, whilst also containing aspects of certain Eastern civilizations. That Tyrus Chal remains so isolated is testament to the will and power of the Dukes of Varl, and the latest of those Dukes is the man with whom we must negotiate our Counselor's release.

We are being aided in our venture by Darim Falinda, a wealthy Akorun merchant who has a trade agreement with Varl, and we will transport with him to join a baggage train within a day's ride from Tyrus Chal. I am extremely conscious that my active participation in this mission is a risk, but even Commander Riker was compelled to admit that my qualifications for undertaking it are somewhat more pertinent than his own.

And I must confess that the much-missed task of commanding

an Away Team in person ensures that, in spite of the regrettable nature of the situation, I am rather shamefully regarding the coming venture with considerable anticipation.

"Duke Haldan Varl will not harm Troi," Darim Falinda asserted positively. "His sole interest lies in her resemblance to his late daughter, a fact of which my brother was fully aware when he kidnapped her."

"How much does she really resemble Duke Varl's daughter?" Tasha Yar asked curiously. She found it difficult to envisage anyone mirroring exactly Deanna's exotic beauty.

Falinda shrugged. "The resemblance is sufficient for the Duke's needs; she's similar in age, height and colouring. It's rather her mannerisms which resemble the late Senga Varl... there is something in the clarity of her gaze and the way she speaks. I think the Duke will be well-satisfied by his acquisition of your Counselor." He gave his lips a slight, ironic twist. "And Kesan will have been richly rewarded and long departed. But you have no need to fear for Troi's personal safety. Kesan is a young, hot-headed fool but he would never take a woman into deliberate danger."

"But there may be danger in our attempt to liberate her," Picard pointed out.

"And how was Kesan to know that you *would* attempt to liberate her? He holds a rather... shall we say *archaic* view of women. He had no idea of the value you would place on Deanna Troi. He took her to live in luxury. He never imagined any of you would object."

"I see." Picard forestalled Tasha's response to this with a few well-chosen words of his own. "You mean he imagined that we also considered women to be little more than chattels, commodities to be disposed of as if possessed of no thoughts or feelings of their own." The rebuke was also intended for Falinda. Judging by what Picard had observed, Darim Falinda's views on the opposite sex were just as archaic as those he ascribed to his absent brother.

Falinda shrugged dismissively, a graceful, fluid movement. "You must be aware that I regret his error. Otherwise I would not be escorting you to Tyrus Chal. Whatever danger you may face, I will share it."

"Which is not so unreasonable," Picard returned sharply, "considering your brother's action precipitated this situation. I'm sure that I have made you aware of the difficulties facing us. You must understand that while I have certain responsibilities to my crew and am not prepared to simply abandon one of them, until Akoru's application for Federation membership is formally made and approved I have very little leeway as regards intervention."

"You have impressed your Prime Directive upon me," Falinda said almost negligently. "I understand the reasoning that lies behind your decision to keep your identity secret, and that your only intention is to return the situation in Chal to that which existed before the arrival of your ship and crew. You will need to take a certain amount of care. Duke Varl is possessed of great personal wealth. If he were offended and chose to use it, he could finance and field an immensely powerful modern army, strong enough to seize

control of this world from the ruling Council, or at the very least start a war."

In other words, thought Picard, if we simply snatch Troi and hope to evade capture until we could transport to the Enterprise, we could be plunging Akoru into the bloodshed of civil war. He knew that Duke Haldan Varl had at best an uneasy truce with the ruling body of the planet and had held aloof from the Council's deliberations on applying for Federation membership. His attitude towards the U.F.P. was extremely defensive, if not yet actively hostile. But if he were thwarted in his attempts to hold Deanna Troi and decided to unleash his full fury upon those who had kidnapped his 'daughter' and those who had aided them... It was a scenario that Picard would have to avoid at all costs.

"Just how sane is Duke Varl?" Tasha Yar asked what Picard considered a very pertinent question

"He's normally quite rational," Falinda returned, "but he has this obsession about his daughter. I heard that her death had devastated him, and apparently he finds it easier to accept that your Counselor is his daughter miraculously restored him than he does to come to terms with her death. He has a second wife and a young son but by all accounts they don't have the same hold on his affections."

"And you feel he will be amenable to reason?" Picard asked, mentally reviewing strategies for his approach to the Duke. Darim Falinda's first-hand knowledge would prove invaluable here. Whilst diplomacy could be brought off on a wing and a prayer, if he were given a choice Picard much preferred to know in advance the kind of man he would be dealing with.

"As I said, he's normally rational. And although he's powerful, he's not of the same calibre as his predecessors. He's an altogether softer man, although not without honour. After his daughter's death he lost heart for everything, so I hear."

Tasha's face was troubled as she glanced at Picard. "I wonder how much of his mind the Counselor can pick up, sir? His thought processes could be very distressing for her."

"I agree." That was an aspect to the situation that hadn't escaped Picard either. "Although at least she has the ability to block out his emotions; she's not entirely defenceless. Even so, the sooner we're able to secure her release, the better. And, Tasha, no more of 'sir' for the moment. Whilst we're in Tyrus Chal we're effectively under-cover, bearing in mind that Varl would likely react badly to anything he construed as Federation meddling. And it won't help to conceal our origins if we act as if we were still on the Bridge of the Enterprise."

Tasha nodded, concurring. "Then what shall I call you?"

"Falinda calls me 'Picard'. It would seem appropriate for you to do likewise. Now, I suggest we go down and take a rather closer look at Tyrus Chal."

Tyrus Chal swallowed them up in a riot of colour, scent and noise.

The jumble of crumbling stone buildings which greeted them as they rode in under the gates was fronted by wooden street stalls with bright and tattered awnings, bearing no resemblance to anything else they'd encountered previously on Akoru. The hot and airless streets stank of spices, animals and people. Most of the latter were dressed in rags and they eyed the evidently wealthy convoy with ill-concealed envy and in some cases outright hostility. Neither Tasha nor Picard had experienced anything quite like it, although it contained disturbing echoes of Tasha's homeworld.

Darim Falinda grinned as Tasha's nose twitched, and then her eyes widened in dismay at the malodorous beggar who sidled up beside her, tugging at her clothing with five grimy fingers. The man had only a stump instead of a second hand.

Falinda flicked his whip at him. "Get out of our way, vermin!"

"Are there no other means of dealing with vagrancy here?" Picard questioned, keeping a tight rein on his anger as the beggar slunk away. "Are there - ?"

"Tyrus Chal is a law unto itself, I told you that," Falinda cut in. "Don't waste your sympathy on the dog - he's probably a thief and cut-throat. Most beggars are."

Tasha stared around her in increasing disgust. A 'wretched den' it certainly was, but she found herself at a loss to know why Falinda also referred to it as the 'jewel of cities'. She found nothing intoxicating about the stench of poverty and disease, no matter how colourfully and stridently it was presented.

"Is it all like this?" she demanded.

"Of course not, these are merely the lower levels," Falinda told her, barely hiding his amusement at her ignorance. "It's necessary to pass through them but not, fortunately, to linger. You'll find the higher levels of the city much more to your liking. Believe me, my own house is very far removed from all this."

In other words, Picard thought, Falinda is content to live in luxury and let the rest rot down here. Co-existing with so much misery apparently causes him no discomfort whatsoever. Not for the first time since their journey began, Picard found himself regretting that Falinda had been the only person with the right credentials to guide them to Tyrus Chal.

Darim Falinda had been the host of the ill-fated Council banquet. He was a merchant by profession, a wealthy one, and although not a Council member, Picard knew that he had connections in that organisation. He had a youthful, attractive countenance which was off-set to some degree by an irritating air of indolence. However, whilst Picard didn't possess the empathic abilities of Troi he hadn't achieved the rank of Captain without acquiring a fair amount of skill at reading people. He felt quite sure that there was more to Falinda than met the eye, that the man was considerably shrewder than he affected to be.

That aside, he had appeared initially as amiable enough, but time was revealing less pleasant character traits. And Picard didn't need to be a mind-reader to know that Tasha Yar found Falinda's attitude and facetious attentions to her intensely irritating.

"We'll go straight to the Duke's palace," Falinda told them. "I'm well-received there, and no doubt news of my arrival has already found its way to the Duke's ears. Who knows? A few well-chosen gifts may soften him sufficiently to bring your mission to a speedy and successful conclusion."

The ancestral home of the Dukes of Chal was perched high on the prow of the promontory, its grim grey walls dominating the city. Inside, however, the fortress took on more of the aspects of a palace. The walls were hung with intricately embroidered tapestries, detailing various and bloody sea-battles for the most part, and the floors were laid with translucent purple-veined marble. There was a show of concealed power in this display of opulence, but the bright-sashed guards, with their long slim swords conspicuously belted at their sides, were a more obvious indication that the Dukes of Chal were not men to take lightly.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Falinda murmured in Tasha's ear as they walked down a lofty and lavishly tapestried stone passage towards the throne room.

"Overdone," Tasha responded succinctly. Picard suppressed a grin.

"Captain!"

Picard swung round in sharp shock at the sound of the familiar voice. Just about the last thing he had anticipated was such ease of access to Deanna Troi.

"Deanna!" Tasha's quick, concerned strides took her quickly to her friend's side. "Are you all right?"

A redundant question. One look at the brightness of Troi's eyes and the pallor of her face told of an emotional strain considerably higher than Picard had been anticipating. She embraced Tasha for a moment, relief evident in every line of her body.

"I knew you were here," she said. "I've had... I've *tried* to close out so much, but I could feel your presence." She took a deep breath and stepped back.

Picard regarded her silently, raised eyebrows marking her changed appearance. For she looked no more like a Starfleet Counselor than he, right now, looked like a Starfleet Captain.

Her abundant dark hair hung loose in a mass of curls, crowned by a heavy circlet of silver. Rings, necklaces, armlets and anklets fashioned from a bewildering variety of jewels chained her throat, wrists and ankles and the bodice of her gown was encrusted with tiny winking green gems, whilst a full skirt of silver-threaded gauzy material shimmered down to her ankles. *It's like a fancy dress party*, Picard thought; it might have been amusing but for the fact that this masquerade was not of their own choosing.

Despite the fact that Falinda, Picard and Yar had been escorted by richly caparisoned guards and that Deanna was accompanied by a personal retinue, no-one had made any attempt to stop them communicating. Not until a strident, impatient voice sounded from the direction of the throne room. Then the guards sprang authoritatively back to life. No-one laid hands on Deanna, but

Picard, Yar and Falinda were hustled away from her as the massive doors of carved black wood leading to the throne room were slowly drawn apart and Haldan Varl strode through them.

His appearance was not particularly imposing or impressive. The gold cloth of his elaborate robe and the profusion of gems, rings and necklaces and even a light-weight coronet could do nothing to conceal the fact that he was aging and corpulent. Yet the assembly drew back to let him pass with more respect than Picard was expecting, and he moved with the steady, deliberate gait of one who is fully confident of his own strength and power. A blood-red gem, the size of a pigeon's egg, swung from a heavy gold chain around his neck as he turned towards Deanna.

"Senga, my dear. What is wrong?" His voice further belied his appearance. It was firm and powerful, commanding attention.

"My name is Deanna Troi," she said, her voice clear and steady, her dark eyes eloquent with appeal for his acceptance of her words. "And these are my friends. I ask you to release me to them."

Picard drew in a sharp breath. He appreciated the strain which must have motivated Troi to make such an appeal, but his own instincts told him that, whatever the calibre of the Duke, he would never be willing to admit in front of an audience of his own people to the lie he was perpetrating. Troi should have known this too. That she had either over-looked or chosen to ignore it was a further indication, if any were needed, that she was under considerable stress and that it was adversely affecting her judgement.

Duke Haldan Varl raked his gaze over Yar and Picard in undisguised hostility. "Your friends? They are not known to me."

Darim Falinda respectfully inclined his head. "Tasha and Picard - " he indicated them with a graceful wave of his hand - "are guests of mine, my lord."

Picard cleared his throat. "I am honoured to meet with you, Duke Varl."

The look the Duke turned on him indicated that the feeling was not reciprocated. He held out his hand to Deanna.

"Come."

"My Lord Duke, I must speak with you in - " Picard began at precisely the same moment as Deanna pulled away and shook her head violently.

"No! I've had enough of your games!"

Picard's own anger grew as she looked across at him, appealing for help against this monstrous injustice. It was quite clear that, for whatever reason, she was experiencing great difficulty in coming to terms with the situation as it stood.

The Duke saw the look Deanna gave Picard and his eyes glittered with a cold, murderous rage.

"What are you to my daughter?" he hissed. His fingers snapped and two of the guards moved with a speed that caught even Tasha Yar unprepared.

Picard found himself with a drawn dagger at his throat and just a finger snap away from death. He held himself very still, his eyes counselling both crew-members to hold their peace.

"I repeat, *what are you to my daughter?*"

One thing at least was certain: Falinda hadn't been mistaken about the Duke's obsession with his daughter. The merest entertainment of suspicion that there was some emotional involvement between himself and Deanna could apparently be sufficient to prove fatal. Picard chose his words with extreme care, pitching his voice as neutrally and calmly as possible.

"My Lord Duke, I am what you command me to be."

"I command you to be gone," Varl spat. "Before my patience evaporates."

Deanna stood mute, white-faced, as if she felt the force of Varl's fury like a palpable blow in her mind - *yet surely she would be shielded against him?* Picard thought. Maybe her pallor was due solely to her horror at the sudden violent turn of events. He forced himself not to show any reaction at all as Varl took hold of her, not ungently, and proceeded to lead her away with him. The dagger flashed once before his eyes and was then resheathed.

"I think we should go," murmured Falinda, eyeing the grim-faced guards with understandable concern.

"You mean, just leave her?" Tasha asked, unable to keep her frustration at the idea from bubbling up in her voice. Picard sympathised.

"Just that," he said grimly. "As a purely temporary measure, Tasha, I assure you."

Deanna Troi let her head drop back against the silken cushions that littered the scarlet-carpeted floor and surveyed her sunlit day chamber with a silent scream of frustration. *It's nothing but a gilded cage*, she thought bitterly, *furnished with loving care for that other young woman who died a few months ago*. A young woman that Duke Haldan Varl insisted *she* become.

She had not experienced excessive alarm when she was kidnapped. It was an inconvenience, an irritation, but no more, not to someone like herself who had every confidence that she would soon be rescued and could sense that she was in no personal danger. Kesan Falinda was a young idiot and she had been able to read him like a book. He thought the whole thing was an enormous prank, and she had not sensed any true maliciousness in him. He hadn't taken her protests seriously, insisting that she would enjoy herself in Tyrus Chal, that she would become the rich and spoilt daughter of the Duke. That statement had puzzled Deanna. Did this Duke wish to adopt her? And why, when he didn't even know her? It wasn't until she had actually met Duke Haldan Varl and Kesan had been paid and left that she realised exactly what kind of masquerade she was expected to be part of.

It was not in her nature to acquiesce tamely to this kind of self-deception. She had tried to reason with the Duke. He had ignored her. She had rated him in anger. He had become angry back,

and Deanna had discovered that his anger could be a very dreadful thing. It was not that he wished to hurt her, simply that he was no longer completely in control of his very powerful feelings. When he was content, Deanna's mind was stroked free of tension. When he was disturbed or angered by her refusal to co-operate, his negative emotions bludgeoned her all too receptive mind.

All her instincts shrieked the Duke's need for counselling to her, and she would have liked nothing better than to help him overcome his grief for the loss of his daughter, if only he'd let her. She was subliminally aware that on some deep level he nursed a massive hurt - and guilt - which ached for release. Indeed, she was all too sensitive to every fluctuation of mood and every nuance of feeling he experienced, whether or not she was in close proximity to him.

Before long the situation had rapidly become so intolerable that she'd been forced to 'close off' her sensitivities completely. To someone who'd never known a time when she wasn't able to sense emotions and feelings around her, this kind of self-inflicted mutilation was almost as damaging in its way as the Duke's assaults on her mind, and she was all too conscious that the resulting mental blindness left her painfully vulnerable.

And yet, for all that, the most painful shock Deanna had received was when she realised that the Duke's strongest emotions were actually capable of penetrating her tightest barriers.

Those most frightening of violations only occurred when she was in his presence, and then such was the force with which Varl projected his feelings that she finally knew it could only be because he was possessed of a potent telepathic talent himself. And like most holders of 'wild' talents he was incapable of restraint or control.

On discovering that the Dukes of Varl all had the reputation of being forceful personalities, she had concluded that the talent was hereditary. Their almost legendary strength and power was understandable if they were able to unconsciously project their feelings and so enforce their wills on others. But only an empath would be sensitive enough to be hurt by them.

For the last few days all that had kept Deanna sane was the prospect of rescue by her ship-mates, and now that they had appeared the whole situation had degenerated still further into nightmare. In spite of their arrival, never in her life had she felt so desperate. And so alone.

She raised her head, hearing the light fall of footsteps.

"I heard what happened," said a soft sweet voice.

"He sent me back here, as if I was a child who'd dared to misbehave in public," Deanna said bitterly as she turned to stare at the Duke's second wife.

Oralia was as slight as Haldan Varl was massive, both skin and hair pale as pearl. Beside her ethereal daintiness, other women seemed fashioned from an altogether coarser clay. Yet Oralia had been kind to Deanna. Had, indeed, been the only one to voice to Deanna her dislike of the deception Varl was perpetrating. In her present fragile state Deanna welcomed sympathy where she could get it and her bruised, numbed mind was very far from operating with its

usual efficiency. Oralia's friendliness was therefore accepted at face value.

"They were my friends," Deanna said wearily, bringing her hands to her head and massaging her aching temples.

"They risked much in coming here." Oralia's eyes were speculative as she curled herself down at Deanna's side. "He must be greatly attached to you."

"Yes." Deanna felt her eyes fill with tears. Sensitively aware of the nature of the Captain's character as she was, she had known full well that, Prime Directive notwithstanding, she would not simply be left here to her fate. Yet in her present state of distress the fact that he was here - in person - triggered an emotional response she couldn't control.

Her reaction wasn't lost on Oralia, but it was misinterpreted.

"I am so sorry for you both," Oralia cried. Winding her arms protectively around Deanna. "Please tell me what I can do to help bring you together. It hurts me that you should suffer so much because of your love."

Deanna finally perceived the misconception but had no energy to think up a fabrication to offer in its place. The truth was out of the question. She might only have been in Tyrus Chal a few days, but it was long enough to know that the population, the Duke included, had a healthy mistrust of the Federation. Even though she was finding it hard to think straight right now, she still knew that it would scarcely be wise to identify herself and her friends as crew members of the Enterprise. Oralia could believe what she liked so long as she was prepared to help.

"Can you get a message to them? There is something Picard must know before he talks further with the Duke. He needs to be aware that your husband is a powerful telepath."

"Your words mean nothing to me." Oralia frowned uncertainly.

"Maybe not, but he will understand them. Tell him to be careful," Deanna begged.

"Of course," Oralia assured her, stroking her hair with gentle hands. "I will take your message in person. Try not to worry further, Deanna. You may rest assured that I will do anything I can to help speed your departure."

Falinda's house was much smaller but only marginally less impressively appointed than the palace itself, lending further weight to the privileged position Darim Falinda held in Tyrus Chal. From what Tasha had seen, these grand town residences were built in a similar two storey style, differing only in scale and the number of noiseless servants. The upper storey contained large reception rooms for formal gatherings while the sleeping chambers were located on the ground floor, and consisted of an inner room for resting and an outer day room for receiving visitors.

Furniture was no more conspicuous than it had been in the palace, although that which existed was elaborately and exquisitely carved from a heavy black wood. Chairs seemed reserved for formal

occasions; most of the time they had rested on bright silken cushions on a deep-piled carpet. The only other furniture - chests, dressers and tables - were made of the same black wood and occasionally inlaid with beaten precious metals. There were tables in every room bearing constantly replenished drinks. In a place as hot and humid as Tyrus Chal, frequent liquid refreshment was a necessity rather than an indulgence.

Tasha Yar gazed over the balcony of Falinda's house, at the lights of Tyrus Chal sprinkled before her. The night was gentle, a velvet-soft wind caressing her face and dispelling the malodorous taints that had clung faintly even to the upper levels of the city in daylight hours. But the novelty of night on a new world had no power to charm.

She raised her eyes to where the twin moons hung, silver and rotund in a dark blue sky, and imagined the Enterprise as it swung in orbit around Akoru. Captain Picard had called in with their day's progress, or rather lack of it, a few hours since. She wondered at the reaction his report had produced, and wished for a moment she were back on board - of what use was she here? The Duke could have had Captain Picard slaughtered in front of her and she'd have been quite powerless to prevent it from happening. That feeling of not being able to influence the flow of events - so old and so familiar - still scared her, but never more so than when the lives of her shipmates were at risk.

And yet if all she could do for Deanna was be here, then surely she owed that much at least to her friend. She'd asked for this assignment for precisely that reason. Did she really want to be back on the Enterprise, like Commander Riker? Tasha knew he and the Counselor had once shared a special relationship; perhaps that was an underlying reason for the Captain insisting on taking this mission himself. Riker was truly powerless to help whereas she might yet have a role to play.

She tensed suddenly at the sound of footsteps and pivoted round, hands raised.

"It's a beautiful night," Jean-Luc Picard observed lightly, crossing to the balcony and folding his arms across the black carved balustrade.

Self-consciously, Tasha let her hands fall back to her sides, aware of the incongruous sight she must present, ready for violence whilst dressed like a harem refugee. She watched the Captain as he gazed down at the myriad city lights.

"Yes," she said. "About Counselor Troi... what are we going to do, sir?"

"Falinda has promised to speak with the Duke later this evening and try and arrange an interview for tomorrow. He seemed rather taken aback by Varl's behaviour today, as was I," Picard added dryly. "He feels that the Duke has become somewhat more rash of temperament since last he saw him, a fact which will not make this mission any easier." Picard looked across at her, a faint frown marking his features. He was nowhere near as relaxed as his earlier remarks might have suggested, Tasha realised.

"The Counselor seemed very... disturbed," Tasha said, unconsciously pulling her own features into a frown that matched his. "I'm concerned about her, sir."

"Likewise, Lieutenant. That's why Falinda will be requesting that I speak with the Duke alone. It would seem likely that the cause of the Counselor's distress is her exposure to the Duke's no doubt confused emotions. Were she to be present at our interview, I would find it near impossible to effectively argue my case if in so doing I knew I was causing her further stress." Picard expelled his breath in a deep sigh. Then his expression altered as he marked the strain in Tasha's eyes. His voice softened as he added, "I know the waiting is never easy, Tasha, but Deanna herself would be the first to tell us that excessive worry is counter-productive."

"But I find it very hard *not* to worry." Tasha turned back to the view across the city, his concern kindling tension of a different kind inside her.

"If the truth be known, so do I," Picard conceded. "Maybe we need a distraction - a temporary one at least. And I rather think that the view from the balcony is not having the desired effect in your case. I came to fetch you back inside. Aren't you cold?" Picard had donned a long loose robe of patterned silk as a concession to the relative coolness of the evening.

"A little, but I needed some time away from *him*."

"Ah yes, our host."

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I find him very hard to take."

"Oh, there's no need to apologise. I find him a somewhat offensive character myself, and I can appreciate that his *modus operandi* is one calculated to infuriate you. I compliment you on your restraint."

Tasha looked up and responded to the praise with a half-smile. She made an effort and succeeded in relaxing slightly. The Captain was right. Worrying wouldn't change Deanna's situation. Nor would getting uptight about Falinda help any. Even so...

"Captain, may I ask a favour?"

"You may."

Tasha took the plunge. "May we share guest chambers while we stay here? You see, if we don't, I know I'll find Falinda in my room at some time, and I'm not sure I could stay as... restrained as I ought to be. Captain, I don't want to put this mission at risk." Tasha braced herself for the expected rebuke. That she, a Security Chief, couldn't even guarantee controlling herself!

"I'm glad you have such an acute awareness of the importance of not offending our host. Unlikeable as we may find him, Falinda is extremely important to us." Picard stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Yes, I think an arrangement such as you suggest will make matters a great deal simpler for us."

"Captain, I - "

Tasha faltered and looked down at the floor, her sudden boldness vanishing in an unusual display of self-consciousness. She continued with an effort. "That time when Q put me in the Penalty Box, I said that if you weren't the Captain I... " She made a tiny gesture of embarrassment, refusing to meet his eyes. "What I'm *trying* to say is - "

"Tasha." Picard placed one hand on her shoulder and gently tilted her chin up with the other, the beginnings of a smile softening the customary sternness of his features. *It's a very attractive smile*, thought Tasha, not for the first time, *and one which holds more than its fair share of Gallic charm.* "I think - "

"Ah, there you both are!"

They jerked instinctively apart, *like a pair of guilty teenagers*, thought Tasha with a flare of irritation both at the intrusion and at her own over-reaction. Judging from Picard's expression, his feelings mirrored hers.

Darim Falinda sauntered out to join them, grinning. He let his eyes linger appreciatively over Tasha before they came to rest on Picard.

"You have a visitor."

Picard's eyebrows rose sharply. "A visitor?"

"A lady," Falinda amplified. "She wouldn't give her name. She's waiting in your chambers."

"Then I'd best speak with her." Picard stepped forward. "One should never keep a lady waiting. Tasha - "

Falinda smiled broadly. "I will entertain Tasha while you are gone."

"Oh, I think not," said Picard with easy authority. "I wish Tasha to accompany me to our chambers."

It was Tasha's turn to grin as she moved forward to range herself at Picard's side. The look of frustration on Falinda's face was the first bit of honest emotion she'd seen there.

"I bring a message from the one you name Deanna Troi."

"Do you indeed?" Picard stepped into the room, motioning Tasha Yar to close the door behind them. "And whom do I have the honour of addressing?"

The dark, shapeless hooded cloak slipped off slim shoulders.

"I am Oralia," she said simply, her voice sweet and low.

Her age was difficult to determine, for although her figure displayed its feminine curves to best advantage she had a slight, almost fragile appearance. She was very pale, her skin only a shade or two warmer than ivory, and her frost-fair hair fell in gleaming swathes across her shoulders. The face was artfully ornamented by cosmetics, the ice-grey eyes rimmed in black and the lips carmine-painted to match the long nails. Under the cloak she wore an outfit similar to Tasha's, only considerably more revealing. She shook back her hair and straightened her shoulders, a smile curving her lips. This one, Picard judged, was well aware of her attractions and knew how to use them to best advantage.

"I am second wife to Duke Haldan Varl and mother of his son and heir." Her voice held a note of pride this time.

Picard's eyebrows rose sharply. "This is a somewhat unexpected - not to say dramatic - visitation, my lady. Your message must be of extreme importance for you to risk coming here."

"Some risks are worth the running." Oralia dropped gracefully down onto one of the silken cushions littering the carpeted floor and beckoned Picard with blood-tipped talons. "The message I bear is for your ears only." Her eyes drifted over Tasha Yar, laden with mute suspicion.

Picard turned back to his lieutenant, amusement ghosting in his eyes. "I think she would prefer it if you left us alone, Tasha."

Tasha Yar hesitated only a moment or so. The woman might be carrying a weapon, but she was slight and physically delicate. No doubt the Captain could adequately defend himself if the need arose. *And it might*, she thought, with a flash of amusement herself as she detected the speculative glitter in the other woman's eyes.

"I'll be in the other room," she said, crossing to the curtained second chamber and passing inside.

"May I offer you some refreshment?" Picard asked his guest, gesturing at the drinks table.

"You may."

Picard was aware of Oralia's scrutiny as she watched him pour out a glass of klvass - the customary fruit-juice and liqueur drink of Chal. He didn't, however, have the impression that she was weighing up his potential as a lover but rather that she was assessing him as a challenge to her in some way. That did not, of course, rule out flirtation as a means to an end. Quite what end she had in mind he wasn't sure, but he was convinced that the Duke's wife wouldn't come out here solely as a message bearer on Deanna's behalf. That errand could, and would, have been given to others. He handed her the glass and she took it with a murmur of thanks.

"To business then." Picard settled himself cross-legged on a cushion opposite Oralia, who regarded him out of eyes brimful with tender sympathy. Then she reached out and rested one hand on his arm.

"I cannot bear to see two lovers kept apart."

"Really?" Picard blinked. "And who are these two lovers?"

"Yourself and Deanna Troi."

"Much as I hate to disillusion you, Deanna Troi and I are friends only."

That threw her, temporarily. She quickly rallied. "But you *do* wish to take her away?"

"That is her wish, and ours."

"She has sent me to tell you a way into the palace, to her chambers. You could take her tonight and be gone."

"Unfortunately that isn't possible," Picard told her firmly. "I have no wish to bring the fury of your husband down upon us and our associates. If I understand him correctly he will tear this

world apart to find her again."

"Are you *afraid* of him?" Oralia purred, not quite succeeding in masking a slight edge to her voice. "I had not taken you for a coward..."

"Your husband is an extremely powerful man. Is it folly to recognise that fact?"

"I'll see you're not caught. Just take Deanna Troi and go. I will be very grateful to you..." She reached out, stroking her finger tips lightly down his chest, her eyes suggesting that she was willing to go considerably further than that if he'd do as she asked.

Picard refused to be swayed. "I've no intention of playing thief in the night, Lady Oralia. Arrangements are being made for me to talk to the Duke - "

"Talk!" She tossed her head, her eyes narrowing slightly. There was considerably less sweetness and light to her voice now. "You think you can win her back with words?"

"Where I come from we recognise that words are a powerful weapon in themselves." Picard placed his own hand over Oralia's, stilling its small but rather distracting movements.

"Maybe you do. But Varl doesn't. He won't listen to you. If you want her, you'll have to take her and run. And I'm giving you the only chance you'll get."

Picard shook his head firmly. "No, I won't do that."

"Damn you then!" Oralia wrenched her hand away and clenched it into a tight fist. Her face was suddenly not quite so bewitchingly fair and there was a hard, cold look in her eyes. Then she smiled, and it was a far from pleasant expression. She twisted the glass in her other hand and stared thoughtfully at the rich swirl of liquid. "If you don't, she will regret it. People can die so easily..."

It took a moment or so for Picard to catch onto this unexpected and sinister little development. When he did, he drew in his breath sharply.

"Are you threatening - ?"

"I want your woman... your *friend*, whatever she is, out of my life! I had to share my husband with his precious daughter for six long years and I'm not about to put up with a replacement. Either you take her and go, or I'll put a permanent finish to this charade. And don't think I'm not capable of it. Ask Falinda about Senga Varl's unexpected death sometime." Oralia rose to her feet, sweeping up the cloak, wrapping it about her shoulders.

"Now just a minute - " That little speech had tried Picard's patience too far. He stood up himself, stretching out one hand to detain her.

She sprang back, her eyes livid. "You *dare* to presume? Lay one finger on me and I'll see you die for it! I'll have Varl take such a revenge on you as will beggar imagination." There was so much malice in her expression that Picard found himself taking an involuntary step backwards. He spread his hands with as much

insulting exaggeration as he dared.

"Believe me, I have no intention of touching you." If the words were polite enough in themselves, his precise and pointed delivery of them was not. "Please don't let me detain you any further, my lady."

She didn't and the air suddenly seemed a lot sweeter for her departure. Picard released his breath in a long sigh.

"Lieutenant!" he barked.

Tasha Yar stepped back into the room.

"You heard?" Picard jerked his head towards the door.

"It was hard to miss the last part, sir."

"Quite. It seems she wants Deanna Troi out of Tyrus Chal, and she doesn't much care how."

"But we do," Tasha said. "I suggest we ask Falinda to send a message to Deanna, warning her to be wary of the Lady Oralia. Falinda should be able to arrange it; he's made enough noise about his palace connections."

Picard nodded. "Agreed. Make it so, Tasha."

Tasha and Picard breakfasted together in the cool splendour of the upper floor dining chamber, noiseless servants tending to their every need. They sat at the black wood table, upon uncomfortable black wood chairs and ate in companionable silence, savouring the generous helpings of ripe fruit and fresh warm bread. Tasha felt surprisingly hungry and enjoyed the meal considerably more than she had expected, given the situation. No doubt it had something to do with the fact that she was feeling a good deal more relaxed this morning. The worry was still there, but she had it under control now, and it was lending her extra edge rather than sapping at her strength.

Half way through their meal, Darim Falinda joined them, ambling over and plucking a ripe red fruit from the bowl on the table. He seemed as fresh as paint himself as he ran knowing eyes over the pair of them and gave a mocking grin.

"You look somewhat tired, Picard. I trust you both had a good night's... ah... sleep."

One day, Tasha vowed, she'd wipe that smug smile off Falinda's face. But Picard refused to rise to the bait, having more important matters on his mind.

"Good morning. Did you see that word was sent to Deanna Troi cautioning her against the Lady Oralia?"

"I did."

"Thank you. And has the Duke agreed to speak with me today?"

"He has."

"When?"

"As soon as you're ready."

"Then I'm ready now." Picard stood up and Tasha also rose from her seat, matching his steady resolve.

"I have also secured permission for you and me, Tasha, to wait upon your friend Deanna," Falinda added, taking a bite out of the fruit and strolling over to her side.

"Thank you. I shall be glad to see her." Tasha didn't favour Falinda with so much as a look as they exited the house into the warmth of the new day, but she felt him edging closer to her all the same and knew full well he was working his way round to some sarcasm at her expense. Finally he leaned across and whispered into her hair,

"I'm sorry if you found my teasing not to your liking, but there was no need to seduce your Captain in order to escape my attentions! And tell me honestly, Tasha, was he really capable of satisfying the needs of a woman as young and lusty as you?"

Tasha took a leaf out of Picard's book. She ignored him.

Picard's face reflected only calm purpose as the black doors were pulled back to admit him, and if his inner feelings were less composed it was of no consequence. He'd learnt many years ago that impressions were often what counted most tellingly in confrontation situations, and that the appearance of non-aggressive assurance was best likely to lend him credence.

Duke Haldan Varl awaited him alone in a throne room about the same size as a small shuttle bay. There were no softening tapestries or carpets here, but curling pillars of shimmering red stone and behind the throne itself a glittering, carved screen of precious metal. The effect was not that of stark simplicity but rather of raw naked power.

The Duke's robes were red this morning, threaded with silver, but the expression on the face was not much different from the one he'd worn the previous day, Picard realised with a sinking heart. Whatever Duke Varl's reasons for agreeing to this meeting, they obviously didn't stem from a complete change of attitude.

Picard inclined his head slightly in a gesture of respect. "My Lord Duke, thank you for agreeing to meet with me. There are certain matters I feel we need to discuss."

"Say what you have to say, and then get out," the Duke returned uncompromisingly. "I agreed to listen and that is all I agreed to."

It was not an auspicious opening but Picard took it anyway. He had little option but to do so. "Your daughter, the late Lady Senga Varl -"

"My daughter lives."

"Your daughter died last year." Picard raised his voice a fraction but was careful to launch his appeal in level and reasoned tones. "I understand how much you loved your daughter and I share

your distress at the cruel way she was taken from you, but the woman in your palace is my friend, Deanna Troi. She was taken by force; she has no wish to be here and she is being kept under duress. As you are a reasonable man, and a man of honour, I request that you release her now to me."

Picard waited, suddenly and uncomfortably aware of the beating of his heart in the silence that followed his speech. There was an almost tangible air of tension as the Duke digested his words and Picard felt sure that they were not being received in the way in which he'd intended. He'd chosen them carefully enough, judging that a reasoned appeal to honour made in complete privacy would have best chance of success. The Duke was forged of a softer metal than his predecessors; a polite show of authority would suggest to him that he had erred. And even a man of the Duke's hot temperament must recognise the justice of his words.

Or must he? Picard began to experience a prickling discomfort, an awareness of the Duke's emotions which he knew he shouldn't possess. Worse still, this awareness told him to retract his words and leave, warned him that the Duke was barely repressing a fury it would be unwise to provoke. The urge to plead for pardon was so strong that Picard had to fight hard not to give in to it. He knew the impulse wasn't his own, which meant -

Which meant that somehow the Duke was broadcasting his strong emotions, and that Picard was being bombarded by the other man's reaction to his words. Given the force of the will that was assaulting him, Picard found it small wonder that the one true sensitive amongst his crew had found it so painful to attempt to oppose the Duke. Maybe even her ability to shield her mind had failed against a power of such magnitude. It *would* explain a great deal.

"Is that what you came to say?" The Duke leaned forward, and the threat was as palpable as a blow.

Picard met it without flinching. "Yes, that is what I came to say."

"So." Varl placed his hands on the arm rests of his throne and smiled grimly. "I agreed to listen. I have listened. And only the regard in which I hold Darim Falinda prevents me from having you flogged for your insolence. *Now get out!*"

"No, you haven't *listened!*" Picard fought against the backlash of fury that struck out at him. He was aware of his own anger building deep inside and latched onto it as a means of steadying himself against the Duke's attack. This confrontation had moved out of the realm of diplomacy, away from reason and persuasion. He could feel Varl's will beating down on him with all the force and heat of a furnace blast and realised that if he showed weakness now, if he faltered, he'd go under and that would spell his death and probably Tasha's, maybe Falinda's. And if he lacked the skill to defend against a mental assault, his only option was to attack.

"You *daren't* listen, because to do so would mean shattering that cosy little fantasy world you've created, a world in which your daughter never died, and you find that preferable to facing up to the reality of her death. I regret her death. I can understand how it has affected you. But I *can't* condone this... *masquerade!*"

With an incoherent bellow of rage, the Duke lunged forward from

the throne. His bulk was deceptive, concealing the speed of movement at his disposal. There was a considerable amount of force in the blow he aimed now at Picard. He saw it coming and moved his head sharply enough to avoid the worst of it. The power behind it still floored him, though, and he fell to his knees.

Despite the fact that his head was ringing and there was a spreading pain above his left cheek-bone, Picard felt a considerable amount of satisfaction. The fact that the Duke had resorted to physical violence rather than mental battery in an attempt to enforce his will clearly meant that he had been shaken off balance. Picard stayed kneeling, lifted his head and met Varl's incensed eyes with a steady glare of his own. His words owed nothing to convention or courtesy but he felt the instinctive *rightness* of his response.

"Yes, you can hit me. You can call your guards in here and have me murdered for daring to face you down. But it won't change the truth, and in your heart you *know* what that truth is. Your daughter is dead! You need only look at Deanna Troi to see the lie you've been living, a lie that's obvious to everyone. Only they're too afraid to voice it to you. Think about your daughter, really *think* about her. Would she have wanted you to wreck another woman's life by forcing her to enact this *lie*?"

"My daughter - "

"*Is dead!*" Picard roared. His words resonated round the throne room. Then there was silence.

And Duke Haldan Varl, face to face at last with someone possessed of a personality powerful enough to match his own, someone with the nerve to challenge him and face down his wrath, found himself stepping back, found himself remembering almost with astonishment the months of mourning he'd blocked out, and heard again Kesan Falinda's voice telling him it had all been a mistake, that Senga was alive and well. How ready he'd been to accept that! How ready to believe the lies. *But Senga was dead.*

Then he turned away, that single, terrible fact drilling itself into his brain over and over again. *Senga was dead.* And Picard knew, because he felt the man's pent-up grief and guilt burst free from him as if the walls of a dam had suddenly collapsed. The force of the emotions swept over Picard like a series of physical blows. The Duke's love for his daughter, his despair at her death, the guilt that he hadn't been able to save her and that he'd never let her love, have a family of her own. Deanna Troi was more than just a replacement, Deanna Troi was a second chance. And he was making - would have made - all the same mistakes with her. The Duke's feelings flowed free without restraint, then ebbed and faded.

Picard felt drained and light-headed in the wake of so much violent emotion, but he concealed the effect on him as best he was able, unwilling to relax his guard. He had only a superficial knowledge of the myriad gifts that were grouped under the science of psionics but it was clear that Duke Varl must be a telepath of some considerable force, albeit apparently functioning on an unconscious level, to transmit to someone without a reciprocal talent. It was fortunate that Deanna Troi hadn't been present during this opening of the emotional floodgates. Picard didn't like to think what effect that kind of overload would have had on her receptive mind; probably a lethal one. He had found the sensation disturbing enough, and he normally had no empathic awareness at all.

Because of what he'd just shared it was impossible not to feel for the Duke at that moment, but Picard suppressed his initial impulse to sympathy. Haldan Varl might be a grieving father but he was also a powerful Duke, and the two could merge without a moment's notice. He pressed home his advantage.

"Then you will permit Deanna Troi to leave with me?"

Duke Varl hesitated one final time and then capitulated. "If that is her wish."

"I suggest we put that question to her."

"Do you indeed?" Varl straightened his back, the grieving father put aside as he drew his dignity back round himself like an almost visible cloak of power. He eyed Picard for a few moments and there was none of the naked hostility of his earlier appraisal but rather a grudging respect. "You're no coward, I'll say that for you. From what Falinda said, I - no matter. Very well. We shall go to her. My wife Oralia keeps her company in... in my daughter's chambers."

Picard jerked his head up, controlling the exclamation that sprang to his lips. Falinda had said he would get a message to Deanna, to warn her. What the hell had happened to it? And what supreme irony if he had secured Deanna's release from the Duke just as the Duke's wife kept her promise to murder her...

Just about the last person Tasha Yar had expected to find in Deanna's company was Lady Oralia Varl. Her pale face, framed by the river of near-white hair, lifted, and a tiny smile played on the narrow red lips.

"Tasha." Deanna came forward, greeting her with a heartfelt hug. "Did the Captain get my message?"

"Yes, but there were... complications," Tasha said quickly, wondering just what had happened to the warning Falinda had said he would arrange.

Falinda met the question in her eyes with a tiny shrug. Then he bent low over Oralia's hand.

"My lady, it is a pleasure to renew our acquaintance."

Tasha narrowed her eyes. *How long have those two known each other?* she wondered. She wished she could get Deanna on her own, see if she could try and 'read' Oralia. Judging by the strain in Deanna's eyes, she suspected that right now she was blocking everything in an increasingly desperate attempt to maintain her personal integrity.

"Deanna and I were just about to take some refreshment," Oralia said. "Please, both of you - join us." She handed Deanna a ruby-red goblet, took one for herself and gestured at the other two to help themselves from the table. Tasha did, her misgivings growing. It would have been very simple for Oralia to add a substance to Deanna's drink. After all, hadn't she threatened to do as much last night?

Tasha seated herself cross-legged opposite Deanna, willing her

to look across. But Deanna dipped her head suddenly, her eyes distanced as the tiny unfamiliar lines of stress on her normally smooth complexion deepened. It was almost as if she had gone into a trance. Tasha wondered what it was she could sense that troubled her so, and if it had any bearing on the Captain's confrontation with the Duke.

Then the tension seemed to lift a little from Deanna - which could only be a hopeful sign - and she raised her head. Tasha shook her own slightly, flicking her eyes down at the drink. Deanna looked puzzled, then her brow cleared and she nodded almost imperceptibly. Tasha relaxed slightly, hoping that Oralia and Falinda hadn't noticed the exchange. It seemed unlikely. Oralia was pre-occupied in flirting with Falinda, an occupation on which Tasha was sure she lavished a great deal of attention.

Finally Oralia turned away from Falinda and looked across at Tasha and Deanna.

"So, your Picard is talking with my husband and hopes to secure your release."

"Not an easy task," murmured Falinda. "I hope he doesn't antagonise the Duke too much." But there was a curious note to his voice, almost as if he hoped entirely the opposite.

"Let us drink to his success," Oralia cried, raising her goblet. Falinda followed suit. Tasha and Deanna regarded each other in doubtful silence then slowly raised their own drinks. Both, however, did scarcely more than touch the rim of the goblet to their mouths, a detail which didn't escape Oralia.

"Deanna?" she questioned, her voice dripping honeyed concern, "You're not drinking?"

Deanna shook her head regretfully but firmly. "I find my mind is too concerned by all that is happening to allow me to have much thirst."

"There is no further need for concern on either of our behalfs." Picard's clear voice rang across the room.

Tasha jumped up sharply as Haldan Varl strode into the room ahead of Picard. But although Picard's face was a little grim - not to mention bruised - there was no overt antagonism between the two men. Something must have been agreed, Tasha thought with a sudden flare of hope.

Duke Varl stopped directly in front of Deanna and looked down at her. Then he held out a hand. His expression was one Tasha hadn't seen before. His eyes were far gentler than she'd realised was even possible, and the words he spoke were a revelation.

"Deanna Troi, I have not been fair to you. Call it the folly of a grief-stricken fool, if you will. But forgive me for the lie I forced you to live. My daughter is dead. So anxious was I that this should not be so that when a substitute was presented, I readily agreed to the deception. But - " his voice hardened - "my grief for Senga must be put aside. For my hour of folly is done. I am quite clear-sighted now."

Deanna took his hand willingly, as gracious in victory as he was in defeat, and let him raise her to her feet.

"I am glad," she said simply. "And I grieve with you for the death of your daughter. If I can help in any way..." She broke off distractedly as Picard, accurately interpreting the warning in Tasha's eyes, plucked the goblet from her hand. Both of them had heard from Falinda of the mysterious nature of the illness that claimed Senga Varl, and neither felt inclined to take Oralia's threat lightly.

"Have you drunk any of this?" he asked Deanna softly as the Duke turned away.

Deanna shook her head. "No."

"Good." Picard placed the goblet back on the table. His expression was still tense, however, as he gave thought to the clash of ethics facing him. The klvass could well be poisoned by a woman who, on her own admission, was already a murderess. He had secured Deanna's release on the basis of returning the situation in Chal to the status quo it had held prior to their arrival but to throw caution to the winds and denounce Oralia as a murderess would be a very different matter.

"And why should she not have drunk?" Falinda enquired with deceptive mildness. "The klvass is excellent."

"Perhaps it is, but I feel it may not have agreed with me," Deanna returned equally mildly. But Falinda wouldn't let it drop. He uncurled with leisurely, cat-like grace and rose to his feet.

"Why should it not have agreed with her, Picard?" he demanded, a veneer of civility barely concealing his arrogant hostility. "Is there something we should know?"

Deanna, who'd been cautiously lowering her mental barriers since the Duke's capitulation and tentatively tasting the feelings of those around her rather like a hesitant bather paddling at the rim of the sea, drew in her breath sharply. She touched Picard's arm.

"I'm sensing great hostility," she murmured. "And danger..."

There was no need to ask from where. Picard said nothing, regarding his supposed ally in silence, Deanna's words merely increasing the cold knot of suspicion which had been growing inside him ever since his confrontation with the Duke. He'd done a lot of fast and furious thinking on their way to re-join the others, reaching some very unwelcome conclusions along the way. And if he was right, it would make very little difference what he said now. The words were going to be put into his mouth anyway, by a very skilled player of political games.

"The question is a fair one," Duke Varl judged, watching the interplay with sharp interest. "You will answer."

"Perhaps there is something you should know," Picard said finally, reluctantly, "but it's not my place to speak of it."

"No?" Falinda pounced. "Then is it your place to insinuate that this drink may not be all it seems? A suggestion which reflects badly on the Lady Oralia."

The lady in question drew herself upright, her eyes glittering cold fire.

"What *exactly* are you accusing me of?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything," said Picard evenly. "Duke Varl, now that our business here is concluded I think it best that we leave your city as soon as possible."

"I think not." The Duke shook his head and Deanna felt the sharp change in his mental processes. Whatever folly had previously clouded his mind and judgement, he was quite free of it now. Questions had been raised and, not unreasonably, he wanted answers. "Have I been mistaken in you, Picard? It had seemed to me that you didn't lack courage. But now, having seeded suspicions in our minds, you intend to fly the scene! I will *not* permit that."

Falinda seeded the suspicions, Picard thought, barely concealing his anger at the duplicity. Duke Haldan Varl hadn't been the only one played for a fool. *Falinda* had deliberately lied to him, Picard, all down the line. He had set this whole situation up, apparently with *Oralia's* co-operation. But what the devil was he really after?

"Make your accusation," *Oralia* said with a toss of her head, "that I may answer it."

"I have no accusation to make," Picard insisted.

Falinda smiled and stretched out a hand to the goblet. He offered it to Picard with insulting deliberation.

"Then drink. Show us that no offence was intended."

Tasha and Deanna exchanged apprehensive glances as Picard raised the goblet to his lips. He remained unaware of them, his gaze fixed on the two smiling faces in front of him. *Oralia* and *Falinda*. The next move was his.

He called *Falinda's* bluff.

"Your good health," he said lightly, and drained the goblet with one swallow.

For a long moment there was silence. Then a brief expression of nausea flickered across Picard's face. He put one hand to his throat and swallowed convulsively. The empty goblet slipped through suddenly nerveless fingers.

"Oh no, no... " *Troi's* eyes were dark with horror and disbelief as she reached out to support Picard in her arms as he slumped forward onto his knees. The sense of danger was like a shroud in her mind, temporarily cloaking all else.

"*Damn you!*" Tasha's cry was raw with rage and there was murder in her expression as she swung round on *Falinda* and *Oralia*. "It was poisoned..."

Falinda turned on *Oralia*, eyes naked with fury, the indolence stripped from them. "You stupid little bitch, I told you not - "

"Shut up, you puerile fool!" she shrieked. "Can't you see he's faking it!"

All eyes swung back to Picard, who carefully prised Deanna's fingers from his arms and slowly stood up. As an attempt to trick

Falinda and Oralia into a confession, it hadn't gone quite as planned, but he felt too relieved at the knowledge he'd correctly assessed the goblet's innocuous contents to be entirely disappointed.

"She's right," he admitted candidly. "It was my intention to allow you to observe their reactions, my Lord Duke. And I'm sure what you've seen has raised many questions in your mind which - "

"Oh yes," Varl interrupted, his tone ominously calm. "Many questions." He raised his voice. "Guards!"

Half a dozen guards, swords drawn this time, filled the room before anyone had time to react.

"Take them, *all* of them, to the throne room," Duke Varl ordered. "I grow very weary of these games." He raised his voice to a roar. "I want *answers* and no matter what it takes I'll damn well *have* them!"

Tasha saw Deanna go rigid with tension under the storm of the Duke's unleashed fury and Picard took her arm, steadying her, even as his eyes warned them both to make no protest at their summary arrest.

The game was far from over.

"I can explain, my Lord Duke." Darim Falinda slipped himself free from the grip of the guards and smoothed down his ruffled hair.

"Then do so," Duke Varl returned impassively.

"You have indeed been played for a fool, as have I. Please believe me when I say I had no idea who these people *really* were." Falinda jabbed an accusing finger at the Enterprise crew. "Only just now did I learn of their duplicity. They are from the Federation."

"Federation." Varl tried out the word and seemed to find a nasty taste to it. He shot a glance at Picard. "Is this true?"

"Yes." There seemed little point denying it at this juncture. "I am Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the U.S.S. Enterprise. This is Security Chief Tasha Yar and Ship's Counselor Deanna Troi."

"But we don't want - " Tasha began.

"Lieutenant." Picard cut across her voice with quiet authority and she fell silent. The Duke watched this exchange with growing comprehension, as if it explained a great deal about Picard which he had previously been at a loss to understand.

"I want nothing to do with the Federation," Duke Varl told them in tones of ringing finality.

"So we were given to understand," Picard returned, "which is why - "

"Which is why they conceived this plot to destroy your sanity!" Falinda interposed quickly. "They tricked my brother into bringing this woman here as a spy and impostor... of course she protested,

that was part of the plan. So that their great and wise Captain could come and show what a fool he'd made you. The legendary Duke, the dupe of the Federation!"

"That's a damned lie, and you know it," Picard shot back, stung to anger in spite of himself by this accusation. He'd been doing some more hard thinking himself in the last few minutes and felt he was close to grasping what Falinda had been trying to accomplish. All that remained was to persuade the Duke that he, and not Falinda, spoke the truth. And that wouldn't be simple.

Their confrontation here earlier might have imbued the Duke with a certain amount of respect for Picard's strength and tenacity, but off-set against that was the fact that the Duke regarded Falinda as a friend whilst the Federation were *persona non grata* as far as he was concerned. Picard drew a deep breath and took a sharp hold on his emotional reaction. This was not a battle of wills; this was a war of words and he must wage it with all the skill at his command.

"You set up this whole situation to suit your own purposes, right from the very beginning," Picard said, and although his voice was measured and quiet there was also a ring of steel in it that compelled attention. "From the moment you saw Deanna Troi, you knew you could make use of her resemblance to Senga Varl and you laid your plans accordingly. I wager a guess that you even tricked your own brother into becoming your accomplice. Counselor - how did Kesan Falinda regard your kidnapping?"

"As an adventure," Deanna returned. "I sensed no malice in him. I believe he was unaware that his brother had... darker motives in mind."

Falinda laughed dismissively. "And how can that woman know what my brother thought? You see, my lord, how they lie at every turn? That's a Federation trick. All they seek is to avoid responsibility for their own actions."

Deanna turned to face the Duke and met his interrogative gaze with level eyes. "My lord, my father was Human but my mother is Betazoid. Betazoids are gifted with full telepathy and I have a part share in that inheritance. I am an empath. I could sense Kesan Falinda's feelings, just as I sense yours and those of the others now present."

"Then what am I feeling now?" The Duke demanded, his tone of voice a clear indication of his scepticism.

"Uncertainty... you don't know who to believe. Old ties of friendship with the Falinda family count for much with you, but I sense that you wish it were otherwise."

The Duke started, frowning as he leant forward as if to study with fresh eyes the now wholly unfamiliar woman before him. She had read his feelings accurately and he was man enough not to attempt a futile denial. Deanna sensed his reluctant acceptance of her talents and communicated as much to Picard with a slight dip of her head. Thus reassured, Picard returned to the attack, not allowing Falinda any time to search for a defence against Deanna's revelation.

"As I said, you laid your plans very cleverly. Did you care that your scheming might provoke a civil war on your world? Or was

that simply part of the price you were willing to pay? That you were willing to make *me* pay?"

"You flatter your own importance in the scheme of things, Picard," Falinda sneered.

"Oh, I don't think so," Picard returned smoothly. "Looked at in a fresh light, it becomes quite clear what advantage you sought in kidnapping my Ship's Counselor. You presented it to me as little more than a thoughtless prank by your brother and although you told me a good deal about the situation I'd be entering, you dealt only in half-truths, leading me astray about the precise nature and power of the Duke. At the recommendation of the Council, we trusted you but you were lying to us both about your motives and intentions. At exactly what stage you embroiled the Lady Oralia in your plans - "

"You see how he sullies the name of your wife!" Falinda appealed in well-simulated outrage.

"Hold your peace," the Duke rumbled. "Let him finish."

Oralia, who'd stepped forward as if to make her own protest, thought suddenly better of it and remained watching in apprehensive silence.

"The intention was to force me into hasty, ill-considered action," Picard continued. "Either I would kidnap the Counselor back - in which case you'd denounce my action as proof of Federation oppression - or I would antagonise the Duke into executing me. Either action would have very clear repercussions for Akoru's attempt to join the Federation, and would have most likely plunged your world into the carnage of civil war."

"If he was willing to see you die as part of his scheming, then that klvass could have really been poisoned," Tasha said. If Picard detected any hint of reproof in her voice, he made no sign of it.

He shook his head. "No, there was never a chance it was really poisoned. It's one matter if I provoke the Duke into ordering my death, quite another if I expire after sipping from a poisoned chalice presented to me by Falinda himself. My death in that instance would merely have vindicated my words. Falinda knew that quite well. All he wanted was to pressurise me into allegations about the klvass which could then be proved a lie. Which would, of course, strongly suggest that anything else I said was also a lie."

"Your reasoning is most persuasive," the Duke conceded, "but tell me, can you ascribe a motive for Darim Falinda's actions?"

"I believe I can. Darim Falinda's whole purpose has been to stop Akoru joining the Federation." Picard hesitated, choosing his next words carefully. "I will be frank with you, my Lord Duke: all is not ordered as... fairly as it could be here on Akoru. Your city has its share of sick and starving, and elsewhere on this world there are those who still live on the edge of poverty whilst others grow rich at their expense. The situation is far from being without remedy; you have a rich world and there is plenty for all. On our arrival here we were shown how the majority of the Council are trying to bring about changes. We also heard that not all are happy at the prospect, particularly some of the richer Akoruns who, far from wishing to share their good fortune, resent the impending loss of their excessive wealth and status. I suggest that some of them would go to extreme lengths to avoid change, and I believe Darim

Falinda is among that number."

He could have denied it. Picard had no proof, only a gut instinct which weighed up everything he knew about Darim Falinda and told him that what the man desired was not a world which would face the future boldly, but a world fashioned very much along the archaic lines of Tyrus Chal. The attitude of the Council, taking new initiatives every day to change Akoru for the benefit of the majority of its citizens and bring it in line with standard Federation practice, was totally inimical to Falinda's thinking.

Darim Falinda chose not to deny it.

"We're not going to change our world to suit *you*," he hissed. "You can keep your notions of justice and equality. This is *our* world, where the strong succeed and the weak go under. I'm not interested in a stable, ordered future under the sheltering wing of another power. And I know I speak for the Duke in this, for both of us like the world in which we live. What does it matter if the rabble starve and live like rats? Why should we deny ourselves to help those who lack the wits to help themselves? We enjoy our world exactly as it is and we're not of the kind to submit tamely to your attempted interference. We want none of you here. You're no fit conquerors or allies, for your Federation, with all its morals and ideals, is weak, Picard. I've seen for myself how your Prime Directive cripples any power you might possess."

"On the contrary," Picard returned, and his ominously soft voice held a note that rang like naked steel round the throne room. "Our beliefs are the heart of our strength."

Falinda drew himself up scornfully. "I call challenge on you," he said slowly and deliberately. "Or are you too much the coward to meet me in fair combat?"

Picard choose not to answer. He raised a questioning eyebrow at the Duke. "Does he have the right to make such a challenge, my lord?"

The Duke nodded slowly. Deanna felt his reluctance to concede even that much to Falinda. She had sensed his repugnance growing throughout Falinda's little speech, and felt too the surprise that laced his thoughts as he heard and then rejected the views he'd always considered his own. Expressed so forcefully now by Falinda, they seemed very far from reasonable. And Senga, who had so often in her quiet, persistent way counselled him to mercy and justice, would have been appalled at them. Knowing that, how could he react to Falinda's speech with anything other than revulsion?

"He has the right to call challenge, according to the ancient law of this province," Duke Varl said at last. "If you refuse his challenge, you are proclaiming his innocence of your accusations and taking guilt upon yourself, for which you will be punished accordingly. I have no authority to intervene once challenge has been called. It is Falinda's right." The set to the Duke's face suggested to more than one on-looker that he wished it wasn't the case.

"Let me, Captain." Tasha stepped forward. Picard stayed her with a quick gesture and looked at his challenger.

"What means of combat do you have in mind?"

"A sword. What other weapon is there?"

The Duke gestured at the guards. One of them gave back to Falinda the sword he'd confiscated earlier. The other offered his own weapon, hilt first, to Picard. He took it, hefting it cautiously. It was slightly shorter and heavier than the rapier blade to which he was accustomed.

"Captain!" said Tasha urgently. "I can't let you risk your life like this. I must be the one to fight."

"Go ahead, Picard," Falinda invited, more of his old offensive arrogance returning as he sliced his sword through the air. "Let the lovely Tasha fight your battle for you. I know she's been itching to murder me for some time, whilst been I've been itching to use a very different kind of weapon on *her* - with or without her consent."

Deanna felt the painful flood of Tasha's emotions and laid a gentle, restraining hand on her friend's arm, repelled by the careless cruelty of the words. Falinda was mercifully unaware of the savage way Tasha had been used as a child, but she sensed that if he had been possessed of that knowledge he would only have derived still more enjoyment from his verbal barb.

For his own part, Picard fought down the rage that swept through him, knowing full-well that Falinda was deliberately tormenting Tasha in order to provoke him, wanting him angry and off-balance for a confrontation where it was essential to remain cool and clear-headed. As a man, he felt the need to reach out to Tasha with words of comfort. As a Captain, he knew such a response was wholly inappropriate and irrelevant.

"This isn't your fight, Lieutenant," he said with a roughness that concealed emotion, and which those who knew him less well were prone to mistake for indifference. "I accept your challenge, Falinda."

Falinda reacted quickly, his sword flicking up and out. Picard countered it - just. And Falinda smiled, as if already sensing victory. He was the younger of the two and, immersed in the archaic traditions of Chal as he was, had no doubt studied with the weapon over a number of years. The advantages were all his, and it was clear that he was fully aware of it.

"This isn't very impressive," he taunted, pressing forward his attack. Picard parried him, not troubling to answer. In spite of his excessive pride, he felt Falinda was either an indifferent swordsman or else, considering Picard so inept that the fight was already half-won, was simply not bothering to give it his full attention. And for the first few moments, as Picard adjusted to the weight and feel of the sword, the impression he conveyed was definitely that of an opponent not worthy of any but the most cursory interest.

As Picard adapted to the balance of the weapon, it occurred to him that to play upon Falinda's apparent negligence might turn the advantage in his favour. Picard was no expert swordsman himself but he had kept up sufficient interest in fencing since his Academy days to reach a certain level of competence. He concealed it now, making no attempt to attack, but parrying Falinda's blows and retreating as the other man stalked him, smirking, convinced of his own innate superiority.

"Is this the best you can do, Picard?"

"I'm sorry I'm such a grave disappointment to you." Picard parried a blow to the head.

"In more ways than one." Falinda showed his teeth in what passed for a smile. "But now I'm glad you were able to indulge yourself during your last night of life. Oh, and don't worry. I shall enjoy taking care of Tasha when I've finished with you."

"Like *hell* you will!" Tasha breathed. Deanna felt the tenseness in every line of her body and knew it was mirrored in her own as both of them locked their eyes on the fight.

"What kind of man are you?" Falinda goaded. "Does nothing stir you?"

Picard blocked another blow, still seeking an opening. Falinda returned from it almost lazily and then found himself suddenly on the defensive. Thrown off guard by Picard's vigorous and unexpected attack, Falinda faltered, and with a deft flick of his wrist, Picard disarmed him.

"Yes!"

Tasha gave a yell of triumph. She shook off Deanna's hand and darted forward, snatching up the weapon. Deanna feared for her then, fully aware of the deep and turbulent emotions this conflict had revived in her friend's heart.

But Tasha looked across and met the Captain's eyes. For the space of a heart-beat only she hesitated, then she put the past behind her. When she handed the sword to one of the guards her hand was rock-steady and she was every inch a Starfleet officer, her feelings under firm control. Deanna silently applauded her, but what put the pride in Yar's step as she took up her position back at the Counselor's side was the slight, almost imperceptible nod of approval from her Captain.

Picard looked over Falinda, not troubling to disguise his distaste. "Yes, some things stir me. Greed and duplicity and wanton cruelty never fail to stir me." His voice rose. "And your contemptible behaviour, the way you've used and abused every one of us here, makes me - "

"So kill me." Falinda threw down his final challenge with reckless scorn. "Or don't you have the stomach for it?"

Picard shook his head in disbelief. "You're beneath contempt," he said finally. He turned away. "My Lord Duke, where I come from we don't find it necessary to cement victory with murder. I have defended myself as your customs dictated. I leave Darim Falinda to your justice."

"*Captain!*" Deanna shrieked, dark eyes widening at the murderous impulse she sensed. Picard swung round, the guards moved forward, but this time Tasha was quicker. Falinda had barely time to pull the dagger from concealment let alone launch it at Picard as he intended before Tasha was on him. One high kick knocked the weapon away even as the flat of her hand sliced down upon his neck. Falinda crumpled with a groan. Tasha straightened and placed her hands on her hips.

"I've been waiting to do that for a long, long time," she said, her green eyes glittering with satisfaction.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Picard said.

"Believe me, it was my pleasure, sir."

Duke Haldan Varl spoke for the first time since the combat had begun. "Very impressive - are all women in your Federation so trained?"

"Not all, my lord," Tasha said. "I am Chief Security Officer on board the Enterprise, and as such I must be prepared to protect myself and my crew-mates."

"You do so very commendably." The Duke gestured at the guards. "Take this... vermin to the cells. I'll deal with him later." He flashed an interrogative glance at Picard. "I suppose you would counsel me to mercy."

"I would not so presume," Picard returned quietly. "This is your world, my Lord Duke. You must dispense justice as you see fit."

"I thought your Federation enforced its own laws on other worlds?"

"By no means. We accord to our citizens certain rights and responsibilities which member worlds of the U.F.P. agree - *agree* - to institute and maintain. Other than agreeing to uphold the Federation Charter, member worlds retain their integrity. We don't impose. And planets which prefer their own code of conduct may exercise their choice to remain outside the Federation."

"You do not subjugate?"

"Never. Our mission here is peaceful; we came at the Council's request. The Enterprise is no warship, although she's well able to defend herself should the need arise."

"That is very far from what I was led to - Falinda, damn him!"

"So your knowledge of Federation intents and purposes comes entirely from Darim Falinda. I see." *That*, thought Picard, *explains a great deal*. "My lord, I think we should - "

"*Forgive me!*" Oralia cried, throwing herself at the Duke's feet. "I have been tricked, even as you!" Her shoulders shook with suppressed sobs as she laid herself full length before the throne. Picard regarded her without a great deal of compassion, wondering just how long she'd been planning this dramatic little presentation. She'd probably been busy devising it ever since her co-conspirator Falinda had been vanquished.

"Oh, get up," snapped the Duke. "I've seen too many of these little scenes of yours to be impressed by anything other than your acting ability. Just say what you have to say and have done with it."

Oralia rose to her feet, her cheeks becomingly flushed, her lips trembling. "My lord, I am innocent. Darim Falinda lied to me. He *made* me his accomplice."

"Did he also make you poison the Lady Senga Varl?" Picard demanded.

"I never poisoned her," Oralia returned. Her eyes flashed but her voice was quite calm and free from histrionics as she met this accusation.

"Her death was sudden and suspicious," Picard persisted. "And you told me - "

"I know what I told you!" she spat in return. Then she turned her back on Picard, staring up at her husband. "It's as I said: Falinda tricked me. He knew full well how I would react to Senga's... replacement. As soon as he arrived he sent a message saying he wished to speak with me about matters that greatly concerned us both."

"So you knew what he was up to?" Picard accused.

"No! Falinda didn't trouble to explain all his plotting to me. He merely said that he was as anxious as I that the impostor be removed. So I went to see you, Picard, and did exactly as Falinda asked. There never was any poison, not today, not when Senga died. The threat was a ruse of his, to get you to steal Deanna and go. I agreed to be part of it, because I did indeed want her gone. *That* was no lie."

"Then you also admit that you resented the Lady Senga Varl, and that - "

"Picard," the Duke interrupted, "whatever you may have heard, no doubt from Falinda's lips, my daughter's death was not from poison. She died as the result of a riding accident... and it *was* an accident. My wife had no part in it. She has many faults, but she's no murderess." He signalled the guards. "Take her to her room and see that she does not leave. This escapade of yours can't be overlooked, my dear. I've indulged you in your little love affairs, but this... Oh, yes, I know all about your indiscretions."

"But you never - "

"Said? I never cared enough. Your son is mine. What happened after his birth is largely irrelevant. Don't be deceived into thinking I'm interested in who you sleep with. I have my own diversions."

"As well I know!" Oralia's voice was unexpectedly savage.

The Duke appeared unmoved. "Did you seriously expect a mighty Duke like myself to be content with one woman? Take her away."

Compassion came then, belatedly, to Picard, as he watched the woman led out, with no act left now to sustain her pride. The Duke accurately interpreted the look of concern in Deanna's eyes.

"You need not fear for her. I'll grant that she's more sinned against than sinning. She'll take no harm."

"With respect, my lord," Deanna ventured. "If you treated her more fairly, you might avoid this situation arising again. It is very hard always to play second-best, and to feel that you are... unvalued."

The Duke stiffened, and Picard wondered if Troi had gone too far. But then the Duke relaxed and inclined his head. "So. You can read her mind too, can you? Second-best and unvalued. I see."

"I don't read minds, my lord. I sense emotions. And hers are strong. She is very... resentful."

"Your words are worth bearing in mind, seeing as I know how accurately you read me."

"My lord, with your permission, I would like to contact my ship," Picard requested. "They've been anxiously awaiting news of our Counselor and -"

"You don't wish to keep them waiting any longer. I understand, Captain. And when you have talked with them, you must talk with *me*. It appears I have a good deal of unlearning to do about your Federation, so the sooner I begin, the better."

When Deanna returned from her conference with the Duke, she felt mentally drained but very contented.

The Captain had explained something of the nature of Duke Haldan Varl's gifts to him, and then nothing would satisfy him but that Deanna detail them further. She'd been glad enough to do so, and especially pleased to show him how to create a shield to prevent his emotions from battering those around him. Her own mind felt much the lighter for teaching him such rudiments of control. For the first time in days she felt the tension unwinding inside her. Now at last she would be able to relax sufficiently to look to her own mental healing.

Tasha was out on the balcony belonging to the chambers they'd been allocated. As Deanna stepped outside to join her, a slight refreshing breeze brushed across her face, bringing with it the sweet scent of innumerable flowers from the rocky gardens below. With a sigh of pleasure she inhaled deeply and felt peace and tranquillity lap round her mind like clean, clear water.

Tasha smiled. "Happy?"

Deanna considered. "Contented, but very tired."

"The Duke doesn't know when to stop, does he?" Tasha commented dryly. "He's been talking most of the day with the Captain, and still has enough energy for a quick course in telepathy from you."

"He is extraordinary," Deanna acknowledged, adding ruefully, "I only wish I were as tireless." She rubbed at her aching neck-muscles then grimaced slightly as her fingers touched the jewellery round her throat. "Tasha, will you help me? I think that now the masquerade is over it would be a good time to remove all of *this*." She lifted her hair as Tasha lent forward to release the various catches.

"The servants have filled this huge bath for us," Tasha said. "I think communal bathing must be some sort of local custom."

"It sounds very... cosy," Deanna observed, starting to peel off the rings and armlets.

"I told the servants to go. I think they were supposed to stay and attend us or something. The room is filled with soap-suds and steam." Tasha sounded a bit disapproving. "It's all a bit... decadent."

"Decadence can be fun, you know," Deanna teased, adding an anklet to the glittering pile of gems and jewels on the balcony. She removed her tiara and ran her fingers through her hair until it fanned out in black ripples round her face. "Besides, don't you think we've earned it?"

"What about the Captain?"

"Oh, I think he's definitely earned a soak in the bath-tub too, but he may prefer to do so in privacy." Deanna's lips twitched, as she tried to suppress a bubble of laughter. "Or were you planning to invite him to join us?"

"No! I only meant - "

"Tasha, I'm sorry if my teasing is misplaced. It's simply that for the first time in days I am amongst friends and there is no-one laying siege to my mind. You can't begin to imagine how... light-headed it makes me feel."

"I guess I'm still a little sensitive about certain things... thanks to Falinda. It's been an Away Mission I won't forget in a hurry, that's for sure."

"Nor will the Captain," Deanna commented. "What will Doctor Crusher say when she sees his black eye? It looks as if our good Captain has been street-brawling!"

Tasha didn't comment. Her eyes were fixed on the red and gold sunset spilling across the horizon. Then, as if sensing that she was under scrutiny, she looked back at Deanna defensively.

"Are you reading me?"

Deanna spread her hands. "I am your friend, Tasha, and you have particularly strong emotions. You know I would never intrude but if there is anything that happened on this mission which you would like to talk about..."

Tasha shook her head. "This whole... experience has been like some kind of crazy dream but it's over now. And once we return to the Enterprise everything will back to normal. That's really all there is to say, Deanna."

"Lieutenant? Counselor?"

Deanna looked round at the sound of the Captain's voice, picking up on the weariness underpinning the strong baritone. "We're out on the balcony, sir."

Picard walked out to join them, moving slowly and stiff-leggedly. He crossed to the balcony, circumnavigating Deanna's discarded jewellery, and slumped over the balustrade, closing his eyes on a deep sigh.

"Has the Duke finished talking with you, sir?" Tasha asked.

"I hope so, Lieutenant, I hope so." Picard's reply was heart-

felt.

"He is a very single-minded and forceful man," Deanna observed, "but one, I think, who is receptive to suggestions put forward by those he respects, or those he loved."

"Senga Varl," said Picard. "She must have been quite a character herself."

"I would have liked to have known her." Deanna looked at Tasha and explained for her benefit, "The Duke spoke of her at length to us." Indeed, she'd encouraged it, knowing that discussing his daughter's life would help place her death in perspective. "She loved Tyrus Chal but she wasn't blind to its imperfections. She wanted to make life here good for everyone. She was persuading her father to build hospitals, schools for the poorer people... only after her death he lost all heart for it. The work was stopped and the city began to drift back to what it had been."

"A wretched den, that's what Falinda called it," Tasha said. "And speaking of Falinda - "

Picard roused himself with an obvious effort. "The Duke is going to hand him over to the Council. He'll probably face a term of imprisonment, plus the confiscation of all his accumulated wealth and property."

"That sounds reasonable to me," Tasha conceded. "What about Oralia?"

"Ah, now that was Counselor Troi's idea." Picard said approvingly. "Lady Oralia Varl has been set in charge of continuing and extending the reforms instigated by Senga Varl. It seemed a very equitable way of harnessing her considerable energy and putting it to some constructive use."

"And if the Duke can learn to treat her more as a partner, her life may become much fuller as a result," Deanna added.

"Hmmpf." Picard didn't sound entirely convinced. "The Duke, by the way, has just agreed not to oppose Akoru's attempt to enter the Federation. He intends to join the Council and share in its deliberations for the future. I believe - I *hope* - I have been able to convince him that it is possible to reform elements of Tyrus Chal, and Akorun society at large, without sacrificing all its uniqueness."

"All that will be lost is the misery, and the city will be the better for it." Tasha spoke with the absolute certainty born of personal experience. "Maybe then it really will be a jewel amongst cities."

"Oh, yes, one other thing you should be aware of." Picard rubbed at his taut shoulder muscles and flexed them. "I have just gathered that the reason for this degree of cosiness about our accommodation is that the Duke has formed the erroneous impression that I am... er... intimate with the two of you."

"Presumably he believes that a Starfleet Captain behaves in a manner similar to a mighty Duke," Deanna commented. Straight-faced, she added, "I think it would be best not to disabuse him of that notion."

Picard's eyebrows flew upwards. "What exactly are you suggesting, Counselor?"

"That we should make the best of our accommodation, for the sake of diplomacy. The Duke has received a great number of shocks to the system for one day. We ought to avoid disillusioning him any further."

"Ah. Diplomacy," said Picard. "Very well. At your suggestion we shall say nothing. And now, as we have a short recess before the obligatory banquet and I gather that there is a bath-tub full of hot water lurking somewhere, I think I shall take my leave of you and go in search of it."

"Just one thing, sir," Deanna said, stooping to gather up the jewellery in her arms. "There is only one bath-tub and three of us, so - "

Picard stopped in mid-stride, one eyebrow raised enquiringly. "Go on."

"There's an old Earth proverb, I believe," Deanna said serenely, "to the effect that he who bathes first bathes fast."

"Naturally, Counselor," Picard said, with only the slightest twitch at one corner of his mouth to display his amusement. Deanna had known full-well of Picard's reputation in Starfleet as a fair yet authoritarian Captain, but she was discovering sides to him that others knew nothing about. Their loss, Deanna judged. Maybe you had to serve with the man in order to appreciate him properly and not just dismiss him as a tough old burrhog. There was a good deal more to Picard than might at first appear. And he did have a sense of humour, when he chose to display it.

Tasha tried to stop herself grinning, and failed.

Picard ignored them both, swinging round on his heel to continue his way inside. Then he paused, looked back over one shoulder, and smiled.

"It's good to have you back," he said.

